

STAR
WARSTM



Jedi Apprentice Omnibus

Volume Three

Jude Watson



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Jedi Apprentice: Special Edition: Deceptions
Jedi Apprentice: The Deadly Hunter
Jedi Apprentice: The Evil Experiment
Jedi Apprentice: The Dangerous Rescue
Jedi Apprentice: The Ties That Bind
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Includes

Jedi Apprentice

**Special Edition: Deceptions
&
Books Eleven Through Fourteen**

STAR WARS Timeline



DAWN OF THE JEDI 25,793 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

25,793 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
Dawn of the Jedi
Dawn of the Jedi
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Volume Two: Prisoner of Bogan
Volume Three: Force War



THE OLD REPUBLIC 5,000-1,000 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope

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The Golden Age of the Sith
The Fall of the Sith Empire
Crosscurrent

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Knights of the Old Republic
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Special Edition: Deceptions

43 YEARS BEFORE STAR WARS: A New Hope
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Crimson Empire
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24 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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Diversity Alliance
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Jedi Bounty
The Emperor's Plague
Return to Ord Mantell
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**NEW JEDI ORDER
25-36 YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: A New Hope**

25 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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36 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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LEGACY

**40-139 YEARS AFTER
STAR WARS: A New Hope**

40 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

Legacy of the Force
Betrayal
Bloodlines
Tempest
Exile
Sacrifice
Inferno
Fury

41 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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43 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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137 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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Volume Nine: Monster
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138 YEARS AFTER STAR WARS: A New Hope

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Special Edition Book One
Deceptions

Chapter One

The water was cool and green. Light trickled down and made shifting patterns on the bottom. Ripples of gentle waves were formed from the force of the waterfall hitting the surface high above.

Obi-Wan Kenobi followed the shimmering tunic of his friend Bant, who swam ahead. He was wearing a breathing tube, but she was not. As a Mon Calamari, she could stay underwater for long periods of time. Bant navigated the deep pool with grace and ease.

There had been a time when he hadn't enjoyed swimming with Bant that much. He had felt clumsy in the water next to her. He hadn't liked that she was better at something. But his Master, Qui-Gon Jinn, had taught him that to value a friend's better ability was to be a true friend. Once Obi-Wan realized that, he had looked forward to their swims as much as Bant.

Bant turned and smiled at him, her arms waving softly. It was always amazing to Obi-Wan that Bant could feel so peaceful in this pool. It was here that she had almost died, chained to the bottom by the evil Xanatos. Yet here was where she always chose to swim. She wanted to remember, she told Obi-Wan. The day she had felt her life ebb was the day she had felt closest to the Force.

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Bant pointed to the surface, and Obi-Wan nodded. They burst upward into the bright sunlight. They knew the sun was artificial, created by vast illumination banks overhead, but they welcomed its warmth on their cool skin.

Obi-Wan hauled himself up on the grassy bank facing the waterfall. Although Bant found peace in this place, he did not. Here he had battled the former Jedi student Bruck Chun for Bant's life. Here he had seen Bruck fall to his death. It had not been his fault that Bruck had died, but he still felt responsible.

"Thank you for coming here," Bant told him. "I know it is hard for you." A glint of mischief lit her eyes. "Maybe I ask you to do it because I know that."

He nudged her with a shoulder. "Oh, am I your Padawan now?"

Bant's gaze clouded, and Obi-Wan realized he had made a mistake. He had reminded her of what they had come here to forget.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly. "I didn't mean—"

"Don't be silly." Bant hugged her knees. "I have to face my disappointment. Didn't you come here to talk to me about it?"

Bant had been hoping to be accepted by Jedi Master Tahl as her Padawan. Tahl had seemed to take a special interest in Bant, giving her projects to do and tracking her progress. Yet just yesterday, Tahl had taken off on a mission and told Yoda and the Council that she had decided to take no Padawan at all. Obi-Wan knew that Bant was upset by Tahl's decision.

"Yes," Obi-Wan admitted. "I know how it feels to be rejected. Even though Qui-Gon took me as Padawan in the end, he said no at first, and it hurt."

"I don't think there is any hope that Tahl will change her mind," Bant said sadly.

"There are other Masters," Obi-Wan said gently. "You have done well as a student. You will get the Master you were meant to have."

STAR WARS: Deceptions

Bant brooded as she stared at the green water. "Yes, I know that is Jedi wisdom. But what do you do when you feel it is wrong? I felt so strongly that Tahl was the right Master. Do you know what I mean, Obi-Wan? Didn't you have the same feeling about Qui-Gon?"

"I did," Obi-Wan admitted. He did not know what to tell Bant. Jedi students were taught to trust their feelings. They were also instructed to be certain that those feelings were pure. That meant that a feeling could have more to do with what you *wished* could be, rather than what was *meant* to be. The feeling must rise in you like something that breaks loose from a deep place and floats to the surface, where it touches the sun.

Was Bant's feeling like that? He couldn't say. He could only trust his friend's judgment.

"Then maybe it's meant to be," Obi-Wan said.

"Still, I must not wait for it," Bant said. "I know that much."

Obi-Wan spied the tall form of his Master, Qui-Gon Jinn, approaching along the winding path to the pool. He stood in expectation.

Bant rose as well. "I have stolen Obi-Wan's time away from you," she said to Qui-Gon as he walked up. "I'm sorry. I needed his counsel."

Qui-Gon gave Bant the special warm smile he reserved for her. "I'm glad Obi-Wan has you as a friend, Bant. You may take all the time you wish. But right now, the Council requests Obi-Wan's presence."

"The Council?" Obi-Wan asked in apprehension. Being summoned by the entire Council was an unusual event. In Obi-Wan's experience, it was never good. Bant gave him a concerned look.

Qui-Gon nodded. "Dry yourself off, Padawan, and come. They want us immediately."

Obi-Wan quickly toweled off his hair and buckled his utility belt. He wished he had time to change into a fresh tunic. He

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hadn't done anything wrong ... lately. Why did he suddenly feel as though he had?

Chapter Two

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon stood in the center of the round Council Room. A steady rain beat against the windows that offered a panoramic view of the busy space lanes of Coruscant.

Qui-Gon had noted Obi-Wan's nervousness and now was proud of the way his Padawan stood, erect and seemingly at ease in front of the scrutiny of so many Council Masters.

Only Qui-Gon knew how nervous Obi-Wan really was. He had faced the Council before. His Padawan had reason to be apprehensive. He knew how firm the Jedi Masters could be.

As usual, Mace Windu opened the meeting. He always looked grave, but today Qui-Gon sensed an uncharacteristic disquiet. He had hoped that this sudden summons meant that the Council had decided to send them on a special mission. But now he feared there was something wrong.

"Do not be nervous, Obi-Wan," Mace Windu said, fixing him with an intent gaze. "You are not here to be reprimanded."

It was unusual for Mace Windu to reassure anyone. Qui-Gon's concern shot up a notch. He glanced at Yoda, but he could never tell what Yoda was thinking. He turned his quick gaze to Adi Gallia. Her bearing was as regal as ever, but her eyes were full of compassion for Obi-Wan.

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Mace Windu placed his hands on the arms of his chair. "We have received a communication from Vox Chun, Bruck Chun's father."

Obi-Wan gave a start. Qui-Gon was just as surprised.

"He has recently been pardoned of his crimes against the state on Telos," Mace Windu continued. "Now he wishes to come to the Temple to receive a report on the death of his son. This is his right, and the Council has agreed."

Obi-Wan nodded. His skin had gone pale. "I must speak with him?" he asked.

"You must relate the details of the death of his son, yes," Mace Windu said in a voice that held a rare gentle quality.

"Know we do that this is not easy for you, Obi-Wan," Yoda said.

"He arrives in two days," Mace Windu said. "Qui-Gon will be by your side. May the Force be with you."

They were dismissed. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan bowed, turned, and walked from the room. As soon as the door slid shut behind them, Obi-Wan's step faltered.

"Must I do this?" he asked Qui-Gon.

"You know the answer to that question," Qui-Gon said. "I know this will be hard. But I feel it could be helpful, Padawan. You will have to speak of something you think you cannot, something deep in your heart. Perhaps if you see this thing plain and honest in front of you, it will cease to plague your dreams."

Obi-Wan gave him a startled glance.

"Yes, I know how much it still troubles you," Qui-Gon said gently. "Isn't it time to put an end to it?"

Obi-Wan's face was still drawn. Qui-Gon put a hand on his shoulder. "Find Bant and get some food. It is past time for the midday meal." Food always revived Obi-Wan somewhat. Qui-Gon did not want the boy to worry too much about the upcoming interview. No doubt it would be rough, but Obi-Wan was in the right, and so he would survive it.

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After Obi-Wan headed for the turbolift, Qui-Gon lingered outside the Council Room. He hoped to have a talk with Yoda. Tahl's decision not to take a Padawan and her sudden disappearance troubled him. It was always helpful to have Yoda's perspective.

The door slid open noiselessly, and the Council members filed out. Yoda spotted him and nodded. Qui-Gon had an idea that Yoda knew exactly why he was waiting.

"Worried you are, Qui-Gon," Yoda said as he walked toward him, his robe rocking with his sideways gait. "Yet not just about your Padawan, I think."

"Tahl," Qui-Gon said shortly. "Why did she not take a Padawan? And why did she leave so suddenly?"

Yoda leaned on his staff. "Should I be the one you ask this?"

Qui-Gon sighed. "You mean I should ask Tahl. I wanted your opinion first."

Yoda nodded. "Think I do that Tahl did not want to burden Bant with a blind Master. Afraid she was that it would limit Bant's experience."

"Burden! Limits!" Qui-Gon exclaimed incredulously. He could not associate those words with Tahl. "That's ridiculous!"

"Yet not think so, Tahl does. Time she needs, Qui-Gon. Help her with this, you cannot. Her decision, it is." Yoda's wise gaze rested on Qui-Gon. "And time it was she left the Temple to take on wider duties. We sent her to the pilot program on Centax 2."

Qui-Gon was surprised. Centax 2 was a satellite of Coruscant. Transports and spaceliners often docked there in order to ferry goods and passengers to Coruscant on smaller ships. The Jedi had chosen Centax 2 to set up their new pilot program, run by Jedi Knight Clee Rhara.

"Is there a problem?" Qui-Gon asked.

"That we do not know," Yoda answered, blinking his large eyes. "We only suspect. Aware you are that this project does not have the full support of the Council. Clee Rhara believes that the

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Jedi should have a squad of starfighter pilots. Some agree. Some do not."

Qui-Gon knew the project was controversial. The Council had finally agreed to the operation, but only on a trial basis. Some of the gifted older students, like Obi-Wan's friend Garen Muln, had been chosen for it. There were some on the Council who believed that Jedi should continue to take rides on consular ships or haulers, or borrow small transports for short flights. They believed that Jedi pilots would lead to a Jedi fleet, a complex operation that would divert their attention from peacekeeping efforts in the galaxy.

"Clee Rhara, you know," Yoda said. "Charismatic, she is. A following among the young pilots, she has. Many are delaying their Padawan status. Allow this, the Council does, but many are uneasy."

Qui-Gon nodded. He had gone through Temple training with Clee Rhara. She had a bright wit and a fierce will that had attracted followers even then.

"What is Tahl's mission there?" Qui-Gon asked curiously.

"A grave problem we have," Yoda said. "Until now, the Senate donated the starfighters for Jedi pilots. Outmoded or damaged, the starfighters are. Clee Rhara has her own shipyard for refitting. Worked well, this system has. But mechanical failures lately there have been. One quite serious. A Coruscant air taxi was almost hit. Aboard, an important Senator was."

"Does Clee Rhara suspect sabotage?" Qui-Gon asked.

Yoda nodded. "Tahl has gone to investigate. Some there are in the Senate who resent the Jedi. Whispers there are about our taking advantage. Track these whispers, we cannot. Concerned, the Council is. Clee Rhara must make the program work, or abandon it we must."

"I see," Qui-Gon said. "So if Tahl can discover that the ships were sabotaged, the program can continue."

"Perhaps." Yoda straightened and began to move toward the turbolift. "Watching us some in the Senate are. Hoping to see us

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fail, perhaps. And watching they will be the investigation of Bruck's death. Also, forget we should not that Vox Chun was once in the employ of one who plotted to destroy us."

"Xanatos," Qui-Gon said. His former Padawan was dead. Yet the evil he spread lived on.

Chapter Three

Qui-Gon decided that the most courteous thing would be to meet Vox Chun at the landing platform as he arrived. Obi-Wan knew his Master was right, but he wished he could postpone seeing Bruck's father for a while longer.

"Here he comes." Qui-Gon indicated a silver transport heading toward them. He eyed the sleek lines of the ship. "How does someone who just got out of jail afford a transport like that? Perhaps Vox still has powerful friends."

Obi-Wan was too nervous to answer. Moments later, the transport glided to a stop, and the ramp lowered and the exit door slid open. A figure stood at the top. Obi-Wan gasped. It was Bruck.

He took a step backward, and Qui-Gon put a hand on his arm. "No," Qui-Gon told him in a fierce undertone. "It is not him, Obi-Wan. The boy only looks like Bruck."

The boy had a shock of white hair, like Bruck. He was dressed in a rough tunic similar to a Jedi's. But as he descended, Obi-Wan began to breathe again. He saw that the boy's features were softer and that he was a few years younger than Obi-Wan.

"A brother," Qui-Gon murmured. "They wanted to unsettle us. That is why he went first."

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Behind the boy, Vox Chun walked slowly down the ramp, his deep purple cloak swirling around the tops of his boots. The last passenger followed a step or two behind, and Obi-Wan glanced at him curiously. Vox Chun had not indicated that he was bringing anyone with him, and the Jedi had assumed he was coming alone. This man was shorter than Obi-Wan. He could be Qui-Gon's age, or he could be older. It was impossible to tell. He had a smooth, unlined face and dark hair cut short. He wore an austere black jacket and trousers.

Qui-Gon nodded as the three approached. "Welcome to the Jedi Temple. I am Qui-Gon Jinn, and this is my Padawan, Obi-Wan Kenobi."

Vox Chun's eyes were the same blue-frost color as Bruck's. They slid over Obi-Wan like a coating of ice over water. He returned Qui-Gon's nod of greeting.

"I am Vox Chun, and this is my son, Kad Chun. This is a family friend, Sano Sauro. He has come to give us emotional support."

Obi-Wan glanced at Sano Sauro. His opaque black gaze and severe, expressionless manner gave no hint of his feelings. Obi-Wan couldn't imagine going to him for anything involving emotions.

"This way," Qui-Gon said, indicating the passage into the Temple. "We have refreshments waiting, if you--was "I've come for answers, not for tea," Vox Chun said brusquely.

"Fine. We have prepared a conference room—"

"Take me to the place where my son was killed."

Qui-Gon bristled at his choice of words, but answered carefully. "You may see where your son died."

Obi-Wan trailed after Kad. From behind, the boy's stocky build and stance brought Bruck back to Obi-Wan vividly. Bruck had been a bully who had tormented Obi-Wan during his years at the Temple. For some reason, Obi-Wan had gotten under his skin. He did not have any good memories of the boy.

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Yet Bruck had developed a close core of friends at the Temple. He had inspired loyalty. There had been a side of him that Obi-Wan hadn't seen. That was what tormented Obi-Wan. There must have been good in Bruck.

They did not speak in the turbolift or during the walk through the corridors to the Room of a Thousand Fountains. Usually, visitors were immediately struck with a peaceful feeling as they entered the vast space filled with fragrant greenery and hidden trickling fountains. The air smelled fresh and cool. Kad stopped for a moment, but Vox pushed him along. Sano Sauro's dour expression did not change.

"Let us begin," Vox Chun said abruptly. "How exactly did my son die?"

"The Temple had been under siege from an unknown assailant," Qui-Gon began. "We knew that your son was involved—"

"I am not interested in your Jedi history," Vox Chun interrupted rudely. "I want to know facts." He turned to Obi-Wan. "Where did you engage with him? Who drew his lightsaber first?"

"I followed him here from outside the Council Room," Obi-Wan said. "We both already had our lightsabers drawn."

"You mean your lightsaber magically appeared in your hand? You did not draw it in attack or defense?" Vox Chun asked sarcastically.

"I drew it when Xanatos and Bruck came through the vent outside the Council Room," Obi-Wan said.

"Did Bruck have his lightsaber drawn?"

"No," Obi-Wan answered. "He was hiding in a vent, waiting to steal--"

"Jedi history," Vox interrupted, waving his hand. "Not relevant to my question. So he drew his lightsaber when he saw yours?"

"Yes," Obi-Wan said. "We battled, and Xanatos ordered him to go make sure Bant was dead. He ran, and I followed."

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"Did you attack him from behind?"

"No, he turned and came at me. We fought. We ended up near the fountain."

"Show me this fountain."

Obi-Wan led the way down the winding paths to the thundering waterfall and deep green pool.

"The waterfall was not operating at the time, since the Temple systems had been shut down," he explained. "But there was water in the pool. I saw Bant chained to the bottom. Her eyes were closed. She was alive, but barely. We fought all the way up that hill," Obi-Wan said, pointing to the rocky slope. "When we got to the top, I realized that in a few seconds all the water systems would be reactivated in the Temple. They had been shut down because of a bug Xanatos had planted in the system. I drove Bruck into the dry waterfall bed. My plan was that when the water came back on, Bruck's lightsaber would short out. That would disarm him, and I could then free Bant."

"And leave your enemy standing?" Vox Chun asked. "That does not sound like a Jedi warrior."

"On the contrary," Qui-Gon broke in. "We avoid death at all cost. To disarm our opponent is our first objective."

Vox Chun shrugged, as if Qui-Gon had just spouted empty words. "Obviously, this plan did not work out," he said evenly to Obi-Wan.

"His lightsaber did short out," Obi-Wan said. "He was knee-deep in water. He scrambled to get his footing nearer the bank, where the rocks are. He picked them up and began to throw them at me. In his struggle to get the rocks, he went too close to the edge of the waterfall. The rocks are very slippery there." Obi-Wan paused. His throat felt dry. "The current was pushing him. He lost his balance. I reached out a hand ... it was too late. He fell below and hit his head. I ran down. I checked his vital signs, but he was already dead. He died as soon as he hit, I am sure. He did not ... suffer."

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"So that is your story," Vox Chun said.

"It is the truth," Obi-Wan said quietly.

"We are leaving now." Vox turned to go. Kad and Sano Sauro followed. Then Sano Sauro turned back and fixed his dark, opaque gaze on Obi-Wan.

"In your opinion, did Bruck Chun really intend to kill Bant?" he asked softly.

"Xanatos ordered him to," Obi-Wan replied.

"That does not answer my question. Did Bruck intend to kill Bant?"

"I believe he did."

"You believe or you know?"

"I ... believe."

"What do you *know*? Did he take any action to kill Bant?"

"He didn't have to! She was chained underwater!"

"A Mon Calamari underwater is not so unusual."

"She was almost out of her store of oxygen."

"You know this? Or is this something you believe?"

"I know it. She told me so after I rescued her."

Sauro nodded thoughtfully. "How do you know that Bruck would not have dived down and saved her himself, if more time had gone by?"

Obi-Wan stared at him. How could he know the answer to that question? He didn't think Bruck would have saved Bant. But that was what he *believed*. He didn't *know*.

Sauro waited, but when Obi-Wan said nothing, he gave his first smile. It made Obi-Wan shiver.

He turned back to Vox Chun. "I'm ready."

"There is one last thing," Qui-Gon said. "The Jedi would like to present you with this, with our sorrow. Bruck was one of us, and we mourn him."

He reached into his tunic and withdrew the hilt of Bruck's lightsaber. The crystals had been removed, but the hilt still bore the markings Bruck had carved. Qui-Gon bowed and presented it to Vox Chun.

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Vox Chun shoved it in his tunic pocket without looking at it. Then he turned and walked off without saying good-bye. Kad Chun and Sano Sauro followed.

With a glance, Qui-Gon told Obi-Wan that he would show the visitors out. Obi-Wan could remain.

As soon as they were out of sight, Obi-Wan sank onto the soft grass of the bank. He felt emptied out and light-headed, as though he'd been sick with a fever. He had told the truth, and they had not believed him. He tried to take comfort in the fact that at least it was over.

Yet deep inside he feared that it was only beginning.

Chapter Four

Qui-Gon watched Vox Chun's sleek transport rise in the sky. The meeting had not gone well. In fact, it could not have gone worse. He had seen in Obi-Wan's face that meeting Vox and Kad Chun had only increased his feelings of guilt. Yet guilt must ease for Obi-Wan so that sorrow could take its place.

He had spoken to the boy, but the words had not reached him. *Life* needed to teach him. Time. Experience. These he could not hand over like a piece of advice.

But he could do something for his Padawan. He could distract him.

Obi-Wan had returned to his quarters. He lay on his sleep-couch, staring at the ceiling.

Qui-Gon leaned against the door frame. "How would you like to take an excursion to Centax 2?"

Obi-Wan sat up. His troubled look vanished. "Really? I can see Garen! And those starfighters!"

"Yes, I thought you would like that. Tahl is investigating some problems there. I thought she might be able to use our help."

Obi-Wan gave a vigorous nod. He would do anything for Tahl. "When do we start?"

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"Now, if you like," Qui-Gon said. "Get your gear together. We can take an air taxi there."

Obi-Wan grabbed his survival pack, and they headed for the landing platform. There, they boarded an air taxi. It was a short flight to the upper atmosphere, where Centax 2 was located. The satellite was a small, bluish moon with no vegetation or water. Its deep valleys and mountain ranges had been leveled in order to accommodate huge landing platforms and various tech support buildings and hangars.

The landing platforms were busy with traffic, and the air taxi joined a line waiting to dock. At last they were given clearance to land. They exited the air taxi, and Qui-Gon led the way to a covered moving walkway that had exits for different landing platforms. They got off at the very end, where the walkway looped around to return. Then they trudged along a windswept lane to a small, private landing area in the distance. Obi-Wan could see five starfighters lined up outside a tech dome.

As he got closer, he saw two starfighters zooming overhead, just silver streaks in the sky. He kept his eyes on them as they dove, screaming, toward the surface, then pulled up. They flew side by side in mirror formation, then broke apart.

"I wish I could learn to fly like that," Obi-Wan said admiringly.

After the two starfighters landed, Obi-Wan recognized a familiar figure jumping out of one of the cockpits. Garen Mu'n removed his helmet and shook out a head of thick, shoulder-length hair. To Obi-Wan's surprise, Garen no longer wore the short hair and long braid of a senior Temple student. He saw that the other pilot had grown his hair as well.

Garen's keen gaze picked out the two figures approaching. After only a few seconds, he recognized Obi-Wan. With a delighted shout, he leaped off the starfighter and ran toward him.

"Obi-Wan! Why didn't you tell me you were coming? It's so good to see you!" Garen collected himself as he realized he had

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neglected to greet a Jedi Master. "Excuse me, Qui-Gon Jinn," he said, bowing. "Welcome."

Qui-Gon smiled. "Obi-Wan and I decided to see how you were doing here at the base."

"We're doing great. Except for a few mishaps lately, but Clee Rhara has straightened that all out."

Qui-Gon raised an eyebrow, but said nothing.

"Just wait until you meet her," Garen told Obi-Wan, his eyes shining. "She's incredible. The best pilot I've ever seen. She's got us doing things in the air we only dreamed about. I've come such a long way from the Temple!"

"You don't look like a Jedi any longer," Obi-Wan said, noting Garen's flight coveralls and long hair.

"I'm still a Jedi, don't worry," Garen said, flashing a grin.

Just then Clee Rhara strode out from the tech dome. She was dressed in flight coveralls, just like Garen. Her bright orange hair was untamed and flew around her face in the wind. Clee Rhara was petite and slender, barely coming up to Qui-Gon's shoulder, but her compact body was built of wiry muscle. She saw Qui-Gon, and a broad smile broke out on her face.

"What a surprise!" she called, hurrying forward.

"I'd like you to meet my Padawan, Obi-Wan Kenobi."

Obi-Wan was examined by a pair of intense eyes the same color as Clee's vibrant orange hair. "I've heard good things about you from Garen," Clee said. "Welcome." She linked her arms with Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon. "Let me show you the outfit. And Tahl is here. She'll be thrilled that you've come."

Clee gave them a tour, showing them the re-tooled starfighters, the student quarters, the study rooms, hangars, and even the kitchens. Qui-Gon noted how the gaze of the Jedi students followed Clee as she strolled the grounds. Obviously she inspired great loyalty.

Clee ended her tour at the tech center, where her students had hands-on experience with engines and hyperdrives. Tahl sat at a

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utility desk, using a voice-activated computer. She stopped speaking as they walked in.

"You'll never guess who—" Clee began.

"Qui-Gon." Tahl said his name flatly. Qui-Gon felt a flicker of apprehension. Tahl had never greeted him so coolly.

If Clee noticed Tahl's manner, she made no sign of it. "Here we are, the three of us, all together again!" she said cheerfully.

"Yes," Tahl said.

Qui-Gon shot Clee a look. They hadn't seen each other in years, but their old friendship gave them a connection that would never weaken. She knew immediately that he wanted to talk to Tahl alone.

"Obi-Wan, do you want to see the starships?" Clee asked.

"Yes!" Obi-Wan answered immediately.

"Come on, Garen and I will show you the fleet," Clee said, striding toward the door. "Then we'll head back for the evening meal. See you there, Qui-Gon."

Qui-Gon waited until the others had left. He did not approach Tahl. "You're angry that I came."

She turned away from him so that he could not read the expression on her lovely face. Sometimes she did this so that he would not have an advantage.

"You think I am in need of help. You think I cannot handle a mission alone."

Qui-Gon was about to insist that such a statement was ridiculous, but he stopped himself. He did not need to see Tahl's face to realize that she was feeling vulnerable. The act of choosing a Padawan had pushed her up against something deep inside that hurt her, that made her doubt herself. He knew that feeling well, for different reasons.

"No," he said. "I came because Obi-Wan had a hard time with Vox Chun. I am worried about him. I knew he would enjoy seeing the base. If we could help out as well, it might distract him further."

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"Ah," Tahl said mockingly, "and that is the *only* reason you came?"

"I heard that you had decided not to take a Padawan--"

"And you thought I might need a heart-to-heart talk." Tahl whipped her face around again. He read lines of bitterness there. "You want to tell me how reluctant you were to take a Padawan, how much it cost you, how valuable it has turned out to be, how I must realize that even though I am blind I have much to give to an apprentice. Do you think I don't know every word you would say? So please refrain. Any discussion of Padawans or Bant is off-limits. I mean it, Qui-Gon."

"All right," he said quietly. "But will you, as a favor to me and Obi-Wan, let us help you in your investigation?"

"Just know that I do it for Obi-Wan."

"Fair enough." He walked closer and drew up a chair next to her. "What do you have so far?"

"My contacts in the Senate tell me that there are rumors that Clee Rhara sabotaged the ships herself," Tahl said, passing a weary hand over her eyes.

"Why would she do that?" Qui-Gon asked, startled.

"In order to prove to the Senate that the project needs funding and more up-to-date ships," Tahl said.

Clee's booming indignation suddenly echoed off the metal walls of the tech dome. "What a load of sludge oil!" She strode toward them, her hands on her hips. "I would never endanger my pilots!"

"I thought you were giving Obi-Wan a tour of the starfighters," Qui-Gon said.

"I came back to make sure you two weren't killing each other," Clee said. "I remember how you used to scrap at the Temple."

"We are Jedi Knights now," Qui-Gon said. "We don't scrap."

Tahl smiled. "We argue, and then I win."

Clee flopped in a chair. "Well, I'm glad to see both of you. I'm really in a mess. If I don't figure out who is sabotaging my fleet,

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I'm sure the Council will cancel the whole program. I can't let that happen!"

"Tell me about security," Qui-Gon said.

"Ships are refitted at a nearby yard, and all the workers have undergone Senate security checks. After the first incident, I restricted the workers who take care of Jedi ships to two. It slows things down, but it's safer. Each of them has passed the highest level of security clearance from the Senate. I thought everything would be fine. Yet another incident happened after this."

"So it has to be one of the two workers," Qui-Gon said.

"Or someone is finding a way to sneak into a highly restricted area," Tahl said.

Clee leaned forward and gripped her hands in frustration. "I can't tighten security more than I already have. Those Senate security checks are incredibly thorough."

"There's another possibility," Qui-Gon said. "Someone in the Senate is behind this, and one or both of the security clearances is false."

"I didn't think of that," Tahl said. "That would explain the rumors in the Senate. The same someone could be responsible. Someone who wants this project to fail."

"But why?" Clee asked. "Who would object to a handful of Jedi Temple students learning how to fly starfighters?"

"Someone who is afraid of the Jedi increasing their power," Qui-Gon mused. "The program is still young. Its potential may scare them."

Qui-Gon's comlink signaled, and he excused himself to answer it, walking a few paces away. It was Yoda.

"Unhappy news I have," Yoda said without preliminaries. "Ruled the Senate has to form a subcommittee to investigate Bruck's death. Vox Chun has a hidden powerful ally there. Discovered we have that Sano Sauro is a prosecutor. Rumor is he is hungry to make his mark. Return you must, Qui-Gon. Three witnesses there will be--yourself, Bant, and Obi-Wan. Fear I do that this process will take its toll on your Padawan."

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Qui-Gon's heart sank. "Yes," he said softly. "I fear it will as well."

Chapter Five

The hearing committee of the Senate did not waste time. They called the Jedi to their private inquiry room the very next day.

Obi-Wan felt a sense of dread as he dressed that morning. He could barely choke down his morning meal. He was almost relieved when it was time to meet Qui-Gon and head for the Senate.

"There will be fifteen Senators on the panel," Qui-Gon explained to Bant and Obi-Wan as they threaded their way through the Senate's lavender halls. The hallways were thronged with Senators striding by importantly, with scurrying aides, consorts, and droids at their heels.

"I will be called first," Qui-Gon explained. "Then Bant. Obi-Wan will be last. Sano Sauro will try to twist your words, so be sure you speak the truth with every sentence you utter. The Jedi have elected not to use a representative. We have truth on our side. Remember that."

Obi-Wan nodded. Qui-Gon's calm gaze was reassuring. The walls of the Inquiry Room were fashioned from transparisteel, so Obi-Wan could see that the Senators had already gathered at the long table inside. It was set up on a platform. Vox Chun, Kad Chun, and Sano Sauro were already sitting opposite them. An empty table waited for the Jedi.

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"Senator Pi T'Egal is the head of the committee," Qui-Gon said softly, indicating the Senator who sat at the center of the table. "That is good. He is a friend of the Jedi."

The transparisteel doors slid open. Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, and Bant gave short bows to the Senators. Then they took their places at the empty table.

"If we are all here, we can begin," Pi T'Egal said. He pressed a button and the transparisteel walls turned opaque. Obi-Wan had expected the shift, but it made him feel suddenly trapped.

Find your calm center. He struggled to breathe as Pi T'Egal consulted his data pad and pressed a few buttons. Bant's fingers gently squeezed Obi-Wan's forearm in support.

At last Pi T'Egal looked up. "This is not a criminal trial," he said. "It is an inquiry only. Vox and Kad Chun have asked for a full accounting of the death of Bruck Chun in the Jedi Temple. We Senators have agreed to rule whether the death was by mischance or if Obi-Wan Kenobi bears some measure of responsibility for this. If our ruling is deliberate intent or responsibility, Vox and Kad Chun can then pursue the matter in the criminal courts of Coruscant. Does everyone understand this?"

Everyone nodded.

Pi T'Egal turned to Vox Chun. "Do you understand that if we find there is no responsibility by others for your son's death you cannot pursue this further?"

"I do," Vox Chun said.

"Then let us begin. The first witness will be the Jedi Knight Qui-Gon Jinn."

Qui-Gon rose and went to a chair set up on the platform, angled so that all the Senators could see him clearly.

"Please inform us of the events leading up to and surrounding the death of Bruck Chun."

Qui-Gon began easily, quickly sketching the problems the Temple had been experiencing and the fact that there was an intruder on the grounds.

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"We knew that Bruck Chun was involved in the petty thefts," he said. "He disappeared, and we also knew that a more powerful figure had intercepted security. We assumed that Bruck Chun had smuggled this being into the Temple."

"You did not know this as a fact," Sano Sauro interrupted.

"No," Qui-Gon said, his cool gaze resting on the attorney. "That is why I used the word 'assumed.'"

"Please go on, Qui-Gon Jinn," Pi T'Egal said.

Qui-Gon outlined the many instances of sabotage, including the attack on Yoda and the sabotage of a horizontal turbolift that had trapped a dozen small children and their caretaker. Then he explained how they discovered that their adversary was his former Padawan, Xanatos, who was then head of the giant mining corporation, Offworld. They trapped Xanatos and Bruck outside the Jedi Council room as the two burst through an overhead vent.

"I knocked Bruck's lightsaber from his hand," Qui-Gon said quietly. "Xanatos grabbed the boy and held the lightsaber to his neck."

Sano Sauro sat up straighter. "So Xanatos threatened the boy? Bruck Chun was his prisoner, not his accomplice?"

"No," Qui-Gon said. "Xanatos felt loyalty to no one. He was willing to endanger Bruck's life in order to gain an advantage."

"Such is your belief," Sano Sauro sneered.

"Yes. Based on many encounters with Xanatos, I have come to see how he reacts under pressure," Qui-Gon answered. "We were able to force Xanatos to push Bruck aside. Bruck was able to recover his lightsaber. Xanatos told him to go to Bant and make sure she was dead."

Pi T'Egal leaned forward. "He said those words?"

"Make sure she is dead," Qui-Gon quoted. "Those words exactly."

"Did you instruct Obi-Wan to kill Bruck?" Sano Sauro demanded.

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Qui-Gon's hands gripped the chair arm for a moment, the only sign that the insolence in Sauro's voice had reached him. "No. Jedi do not instruct to kill. My instruction was to follow Bruck in order to prevent him from killing Bant. This is exactly what he did. I mourn the loss of life, but I am proud of my Padawan's actions." Qui-Gon gave Obi-Wan a warm glance.

"Proud?" Sano Sauro stood. "Proud that a young Jedi student is dead?"

"Proud that Obi-Wan tried his best to save him, even after Bruck Chun tried very hard to kill him," Qui-Gon said, his voice strong. "Proud that he was able to show mercy and compassion even while facing great anger from another. That is the Jedi way."

Sano Sauro sat with a sneer. "Did you see this ... *compassion* for yourself, Qui-Gon Jinn?"

"No. I was engaged in a battle with Xanatos."

"Then we will have to take your word for it."

"No," Qui-Gon said. "You will have to take Obi-Wan's word for it. I do."

Sano Sauro waved his hand. "I have no more questions for this witness."

Pi T'Egal looked at the other Senators. None of them had questions. "Thank you, Qui-Gon Jinn. Now let us hear from Bant."

Qui-Gon strode back to the table, giving Bant an encouraging look on the way. Bant came forward. Her salmon skin glowed, but her eyes were dim with nervousness. When she sat, Obi-Wan saw how she reached down inside to calm herself. Her chin lifted, and she turned a resolute face to Pi T'Egal.

Pi T'Egal spoke gently, for Bant inspired gentleness in everyone. "Tell us what happened that afternoon, Bant."

"I was captured by Xanatos and Bruck Chun," Bant said in a clear, steady voice. "They took me to the Room of a Thousand Fountains. We used the water tunnels so that we would not be seen. There, Xanatos chained me to the bottom of the waterfall pool. He told me to prepare for death, that Obi-Wan and Qui-

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Gon would not be able to save me. I did not believe him. But as the time went on, I realized that I had reached the limit of how long I could stay underwater. Then I went beyond it. I knew I was close to death. I prepared for it. And then I felt Obi-Wan's presence. I could not see him, but I knew he was there. I felt the Force surge and give me strength to hold on. A short time later, I felt Obi-Wan release me and carry me to the surface. He dragged me up onto the bank. I saw Bruck Chun lying nearby. He was dead," Bant concluded in a soft voice and bowed her head. "That is all I know."

The note of insolence in Sano Sauro's voice changed to the soft purring of a deadly animal. "You say you were near your limit underwater. Is there a prescribed amount of time a Calamarian can be without oxygen?"

"No," Bant said. "It varies from individual to individual."

"Have you ever passed out underwater, Bant?"

"No."

"Never reached your limit?"

"No," Bant said. "Not until that day."

"Yet you did not pass out, did you? How old are you, Bant?" Sano Sauro asked, suddenly switching gears.

"I am twelve. I was eleven at the time this happened."

"If you had never reached it before, and you did not reach it that day, how do you *know* you were close to death?" Sano Sauro fired the question abruptly.

She blinked slowly. "I felt death was near—"

"So it was a *feeling*."

Obi-Wan's muscles tensed. Confusion flittered over Bant's face. She had not expected this attack.

"Jedi are taught to trust our feelings."

"Ah. And what was your state of mind?"

"I was in a meditative state, waiting for death should it choose to come."

"Can you say for sure how much longer you could have held out, if Kenobi had not rescued you?"

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Bant hesitated.

"The truth," he warned.

"No ... I cannot ..."

Sano Sauro spun around and faced the Senators. "So we are to trust the *feeling* of an eleven-year-old that she was in mortal danger, so that any efforts to free her were justified. A young man is dead because of *this*?"

"But I know my abilities and my capacities," Bant cried. "I am sure I was close to death!"

"I have no more questions," Sano Sauro said.

"I think it's time to end for today," Pi T'Egal announced. "We will meet again tomorrow at the same time."

The Senators rose. Bant rose shakily from the chair and approached Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon.

"I failed you. ..."

"No," Qui-Gon said firmly. "You told the truth."

"It's all right, Bant," Obi-Wan said. "It was that Sano Sauro, twisting everything. He has no respect for Jedi."

"The Senators do," Qui-Gon told her. "They will not swallow his interpretation. Do not fret about it." He led her gently toward the door, speeding up his pace a fraction in order to avoid Vox Chun and Sano Sauro, who were also heading in that direction.

Obi-Wan was left with Kad Chun. Their eyes met. A wave of anger washed over Obi-Wan, a wave he knew he must resist. But he could not. They had attacked Bant, and he could not forgive them for that.

Kad caught his anger. Obi-Wan saw the flash of satisfaction in the pale gaze that was so like Bruck's.

"So you are not so perfect, are you, Obi-Wan Kenobi?" Kad asked in a tone of soft menace. "I see the hate in your eyes."

"I don't hate you, Kad," Obi-Wan answered, struggling to keep his voice even. "But that attack on Bant--is that your idea of justice?"

Kad's hands balled into fists. "And killing my brother--is that your idea of mercy?" he spat out.

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Their gazes locked. Obi-Wan had never faced such blazing, personal hatred and pain. He felt the shock of it hit him. He wanted to run, but he stood his ground.

Kad finally tore his gaze away. Then he turned and hurried after his father.

Chapter Six

There was nothing more he could do for Obi-Wan, Qui-Gon reflected as he boarded an air taxi for Centax 2. He had said everything that needed to be said. One of the hardest tasks of a Master was the decision to step back. His Padawan needed to deal with his feelings on his own.

And Tahl needed his help, whether she wanted it or not.

He landed on Centax 2 and took the moving walkway to the Jedi base. He found Tahl in the tech dome, going over starship specifications. By now she could recognize his step moments after he entered a room.

"I thought I needed to know some details of a starship engine," she said without preliminaries. She pushed away the voice recorder that read specifications aloud to her and turned to him. "How was the hearing?"

"Hard to say." Qui-Gon sat next to her. "It was very hard on Bant."

"Bant? Why?" Tahl's tone was sharp. Qui-Gon noted how she instinctively jumped to Bant's defense.

"Sano Sauro grilled her about how long a Mon Calamari can stay underwater. Bant was forced to say that she could not be sure how close to death she was."

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Tahl groaned. "And Bant would see that as a betrayal of Obi-Wan."

"I'm afraid so. I'm hoping Obi-Wan will talk to her at the Temple. Even in the midst of his own pain, he will reach out to Bant. Obi-Wan himself cannot find composure."

She sighed. "They do so much and have come so far. We can't forget they are still young."

"I know he'll be fine in the end," Qui-Gon said. "But it's hard to stand by and watch him go through this." He looked at Tahl searchingly. "Yet it is satisfying just the same to be able to stand by him."

Tahl turned and ran her fingers over a blueprint. The lines were raised so that her fingers could read the shapes, and the voice recorder told her what she was examining. "I didn't realize that the thrust dampers were located so far to the rear," she said coolly.

Obviously, even a gentle hint that Tahl could benefit from a Master/Padawan relationship would be ignored. Qui-Gon decided to follow her lead. Primarily because he knew he had no choice. "Have you interviewed the two workers yet?" he asked.

"No, I was just about to. They know an investigator is here. I wanted them to be nervous. Do you want to come?"

"If you don't mind—"

"Of course I mind," Tahl said, rising smoothly. "But since when does that stop you?"

At least there was amusement in her tone. Qui-Gon walked beside her to the adjoining hangar, where the starfighters were refitted.

Once they got into the hangar itself, Qui-Gon had to restrain himself from taking Tahl's arm. The ground was cluttered with tools and stacks of parts, large and small. But using her extraordinary reflexes and special training, Tahl now used a gliding walk that guided her safely around obstacles.

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"You do not need TooJay any longer for navigation, I see," Qui-Gon remarked, referring to Tahl's endlessly chattering personal navigation droid.

Her lips curved in a smile. "I worked very hard so that I don't. But I brought her here anyway. Unfortunately, I still need her for some things."

"The mechanics are to the left," Qui-Gon instructed. He studied them as he and Tahl approached.

One was a Twi'lek, with large head tails wrapped up in cloth to keep out of his way. His skin was light blue. The other mechanic was human, his body short and compact, the sides of his head shaved so that his close-cropped hair ran down the center of his head.

"We wonder if we could have a few words with you," Tahl said.

The two mechanics put down their tools and turned to them. "Of course," the Twi'lek said a bit nervously. "I am Haly Dura and this is Tarrence Chenati. What can we do for you?"

"We are investigating the mechanical failures on the starfighters," Qui-Gon explained.

"We already have gone through an investigation," Haly Dura said. "We were cleared."

"We just want to ask a few questions," Tahl said. "Clee Rhara has asked for our help."

"I'm sure we have answered all those questions," Haly Dura said impatiently.

"Then you will answer them a second time," Tahl said, a hard edge beneath her calm tone.

Tarrence Chenati glanced at his coworker. "Of course we will cooperate. We do not want a cloud of suspicion over our heads. We are concerned as well. We have gone over every moment of our shifts with Clee Rhara but can't understand how it could have happened."

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"This is a restricted area," Haly Dura said. "We're the only ones allowed here. That means that someone must have broken in after hours."

Qui-Gon studied both mechanics. He concentrated on looks and gestures for clues that one might be lying, knowing that Tahl would pick up vocal clues.

"You do all the repair work on the starfighters, correct?" Tahl asked.

The two workers nodded, then realized Tahl could not see them.

"Yes," they said together.

"What about the ionization chamber?" Tahl asked.

The last accident had taken place because of a malfunction in the ionization chamber, Qui-Gon knew.

"The ionization chamber did not need retrofitting," Haly Dura said. "We ran a check on it, of course."

"How do you do that?" Tahl asked pleasantly.

"On the control panel. Here." Haly Dura indicated a computer panel. "It showed no problems."

"The starship was cleared for flying the next day," Tarrence Chenati said. "Until then the ship was here, in the hangar, under tight surveillance."

"Do you mind if we look around?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Help yourself."

The two mechanics went on with their work, soldering laser power converters. Qui-Gon and Tahl strolled through the hangar.

"Did you pick up anything from our two friends?" Qui-Gon murmured.

"A smell," Tahl whispered back. "It was on Tarrence Chenati but not Haly Dura. Could be nothing. It's an industrial smell, though. I have an idea. Let's come back after they've gone."

They did not have long to wait. The two workers soon quit for the day. Clee Rhara had given the Jedi all the security codes, so they quickly slipped back inside. Qui-Gon powered up the

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lights. Not too long ago, he would have been leery of relying on Tahl's sense of smell for a clue. He knew better now.

Tahl seated herself on a low bench. "Qui-Gon, bring me the different compounds they use--grease, conductors, solvents--they should be all along the east wall. There's a storage unit--I know it from the schematic of the repair sector. Bring them one at a time."

Qui-Gon was too curious to mind being ordered. He found the storage unit. Everything was neatly labeled. Qui-Gon knew a fair amount about starship engines, but even he was surprised to see how many different kinds of grease, conductors, and solvents were used to keep a starship running.

He started with grease. Tahl inspected the various kinds, her eyes closed in concentration. After each deep sniff, she shook her head. Some of the chemical compounds caused her to cough violently, and her eyes streamed tears, but she kept going. They had run through eleven different chemical compounds when Qui-Gon brought her something simply labeled CONDUCTOR X-112.

Tahl took a deep sniff and let out a racking cough. She leaned over and took deep breaths of air. When she could speak, she croaked, "That's it. No wonder I could still smell it."

Qui-Gon entered the compound into the computer to find out its uses. "It only has one function--as a conductor in the ionization chamber."

Tahl slapped her hand on the bench. "That's what I was hoping for. Chenati lied. He worked on the ionization chamber. Yet they said they didn't have to."

"And that's where the malfunction was," Qui-Gon said. "Let's go back and check out Chenati's credentials again."

After frustrated hours of searching, Tahl and Qui-Gon had come up with nothing.

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"Everything checks out," Tahl said, sighing. "Just because I pick up a smell from the guy's coveralls doesn't mean he's a saboteur. There's probably another explanation."

"His security checks are flawless," Qui-Gon said, looking at the information they'd amassed. "His record is incredibly clean."

"Yet he has no family. Never married or had children," Tahl mused. "And he sure moved around the galaxy."

"You could say all those things about me," Qui-Gon said.

Tahl's lips curved in a smile. "Well, you are a suspicious character."

It was close to dawn. Soon the pilots and Clee Rhara would awaken and the day would begin. Today all the starfighter pilots would take to the air.

"Maybe his clearances are too good," Tahl said. "I've got one more idea." Her fingers flew over the data pad keys.

Qui-Gon leaned over her shoulder to look. "You're doing a search of the deceased register?"

"Just wait."

Qui-Gon suppressed a yawn as he stared at the screen. Finally a list of information popped up. As he scanned it, the voice recorder read it out to Tahl.

It was the same background as Tarrence Chenati. The same security clearances. The same retinal scan.

Only this Tarrence Chenati had died twenty years before.

Chapter Seven

Obi-Wan woke at dawn. He heard the soft footsteps of the Temple students heading to meditation. He knew he should go with them. Meditation would calm his mind for the day ahead. But he could not bear to move. He did not want this day to begin.

The nighttime hours had seemed to stretch on endlessly. Obi-Wan had wanted to contact Qui-Gon, but he had nothing to say, just a longing for his Master's serene presence. He had looked for Bant, but she had told him she was going to sleep early and didn't want to talk. Just when he needed his friends, they disappeared.

Obi-Wan swung his legs over his sleep-couch. Across the room, his comlink was blinking. He hurried toward it eagerly. Maybe Qui-Gon had returned and wanted to take the morning meal together. The hearing wasn't for hours yet. If he'd thought last night was endless, this morning would be even worse.

He heard Qui-Gon's voice with joy, but disappointment flooded him within seconds.

"Obi-Wan, I'm still on Centax 2. Something has come up and I need to stay. I should be back for the hearing."

"*Should* be?" Obi-Wan couldn't keep the anxiety out of his voice.

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"You will do fine, Padawan. Speak the truth. That is all you need."

It is not all I need! Obi-Wan wanted to cry. He needed his Master's presence.

Qui-Gon sensed his dismay. "Tahl and I are very close to solving the problems here. The lives of Jedi pilots depend on us. I will try to make it, Obi-Wan. Now I must go."

Qui-Gon sounded rushed. Obi-Wan said good-bye and ended the communication. He looked out at the spires of Coruscant, then above to the upper atmosphere where Centax 2 was shrouded in clouds. Tahl had gone there alone to solve the base's problems. She had made it clear that she did not welcome Qui-Gon's interference. Why had Qui-Gon made the decision to support Tahl instead of his Padawan?

Tahl had always been more important, Obi-Wan thought bitterly. On Melida/Daan, she had been Qui-Gon's first priority. He had been anxious to get her off-planet and out of danger, even at the cost of leaving his Padawan behind. Tahl's evacuation had been more important than a civil war and a righteous cause.

He rested his hot forehead against the cool pane. He knew his thoughts were petty. He knew that his guilt about Bruck was tearing him up inside.

Bant. Bant would help him. She always had a way of seeing things clearly, yet never making him feel stupid for having the thoughts he did. He went to her quarters, but she had already left. Obi-Wan searched for her in the meditation rooms and the dining hall, where students were beginning to gather. There was no sign of her. No one had seen her that morning.

Obi-Wan decided to go down to the Room of a Thousand Fountains. Maybe he could calm his fevered thoughts there and prepare for the ordeal ahead.

The coolness of the air hit him as he exited the turbolift. He paused to listen for the quiet rush of the hidden fountains, then moved down the overgrown paths toward the waterfall. He threw himself on the grassy bank. The waterfall streamed over

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the rocks and caressed his skin with its cool, gentle spray. He gazed at the clear green of the pool, trying to calm his mind. ...

It was like a dream. Bant was at the bottom of the pool. Her eyes were closed. Her salmon skin was pale, paler than he'd ever seen it.

This was no dream. Bant was in trouble. Obi-Wan bounded to his feet and dived into the pool in one fluid movement. Bant's eyes opened as she saw him stroking frantically toward her. She shook her head slowly, as if to tell him to go away. Obi-Wan ignored her. He simply scooped her up in his arms and kicked toward the surface, panic sending a burst of energy through his muscles.

He came up gasping for air. Bant sucked air in through her lungs and shook her head violently.

"No, no, let me go back--"

He dragged her to the bank and pushed her up. Bant scrambled onto the grass and collapsed. He hauled himself out and sat next to her, breathing heavily.

"What was that all about?"

Bant's face was pressed against the grass. "I was ... testing ... my limit," she said breathlessly.

Obi-Wan sat up. "You were *what*?"

"He said I didn't ... know my limit," she said, sucking in deep lungfuls of air. "If I stayed under the same amount of time and passed out, then we would know I was as close to death as I thought."

"Great plan," Obi-Wan said. "Do you mind telling me how you were going to get to the surface?"

"I rigged a chronometer to a signal that would alert security that I was in trouble," Bant said, her breathing slightly more normal. "I wasn't in danger."

"What if security didn't get here in time?" Obi-Wan demanded shakily. "What if you were already dead? You took a great risk, Bant. How could you do that to me?"

She looked up at him, astonished. "I was doing it *for* you!"

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"But what if something had happened? How could you let me go through one more death?" Obi-Wan knew that the best way to convince Bant that her plan was foolish was to make her think that the greatest danger lay in hurting him.

"I didn't think of it that way," Bant said.

Obi-Wan took a deep breath to steady his voice. "Thank you for trying to help, Bant. But Qui-Gon is right. You can't. He can't. I must go through this myself. Promise me you won't do this again."

Slowly, Bant nodded. "All right. I promise," she said gravely.

"This is when we must be at our strongest," he said. "We must trust in the truth and the Force."

"And the Force will be with us," Bant said.

Chapter Eight

"Qui-Gon was right," Tahl said to Qui-Gon and Clee Rhara. "Tarrence Chenati must have the backing of someone powerful in the Senate."

"In the Senate?" Clee asked, her eyes flashing. "A *Senator* is doing this?"

"Why not?" Qui-Gon asked mildly. "They are rarely no better and sometimes worse than most beings."

"The Senate uses its own spies," Tahl said. "They are called 'no-names.' A whole identity is created, with text docs and clearances. When the no-name dies, the identity is retired." She swept her hand toward the documents on Tarrence Chenati. "This kind of identity. What if someone had access to those retired identities and stole one for the saboteur?"

"That makes sense," Qui-Gon said. "Who would have access?"

Tahl frowned: "Hard to say. It could be almost any senior level Senator with the right contacts and the right bribes. Tracing it would be close to impossible."

"If Chenati is just a hired saboteur, he won't have much loyalty," Qui-Gon guessed. "If we capture him, he might tell us what we want to know."

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"Chenati's shift starts in fifteen minutes," Clee Rhara said. "I don't want him near those ships."

"Let us handle this," Qui-Gon advised her. "Go to the students. Keep everyone away from the hangar. And try to head off Haly Dura, too."

Clee Rhara nodded. She strode off toward the student quarters. Tahl and Qui-Gon turned to go, but a signal went off on the control panel of the security system.

"It's Chenati. He's early," Qui-Gon said tersely. Without another word, Tahl and Qui-Gon hurried to the hangar. The huge durasteel doors were already open, the starfighters lined up inside. Qui-Gon saw Chenati working on a control panel on the side of one of the starfighters.

"He's fifteen meters to the left, working on the right side of the starfighter," he said to Tahl.

"Let's flank him," she suggested. "But not until the last second. We don't want to scare him off."

Qui-Gon and Tahl strolled toward Chenati, who had caught sight of them and waved cheerfully. He reached down into his tool kit. Something alerted Qui-Gon even before Chenati began to rise again. He was too friendly.

"He knows," Qui-Gon said.

Chenati came back up with a blaster. The fire pinged by them, since Tahl and Qui-Gon had already jumped apart. Qui-Gon's lightsaber was activated in a flash, and he sprang to deflect the blaster fire from Tahl.

"Stop protecting me!" she shouted.

But how could he? Tahl's perceptions were extraordinarily acute, but even she could not deflect rapid blaster fire she could not see. Tahl began to move in an erratic zigzag motion toward Chenati. Chenati backed away, keeping up a steady burst of fire. Qui-Gon moved forward, keeping himself between Tahl and the blaster fire. He knew she was listening for the rustle of clothing, the stir of air to tell her which way Chenati was aiming. But there was too much other noise surrounding her.

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Suddenly Chenati raced into the cockpit of the starfighter. The windshield began to close.

Tahl heard the noise and began to run. The starfighter began to move, straight toward her.

"Tahl! Straight ahead!" Qui-Gon yelled. He started toward her, but Tahl had already accessed the Force and gave a great leap to her left, placing her safely out of the starfighter's way. The distraction had cost Qui-Gon. He could not reach Chenati. He could only watch as the starship took off.

Tahl deactivated her lightsaber and tucked it into her belt in an angry motion. "Perhaps if you weren't so intent on protecting me, you could have captured him." Her voice was sharp and bitter. "Perhaps if I didn't *need* to be protected, things would be different."

"Tahl—"

"Qui-Gon! Tahl!" Clee came running up. "I saw Chenati take off." Clee stared at the sky, empty now.

"It was either kill him or let him go," Qui-Gon said.

"It's all right," Clee said. "At least we know the starfighters are safe now."

"You'll have to check these out," Tahl said. "He was here for a few minutes."

"Will do. Thank you, good friends," Clee Rhara said warmly to Qui-Gon and Tahl. She had always had a sunny nature, eager to look at the bright side of things. "We can continue the program now."

"But you don't know who your enemy is," Tahl told her.

"That worries me, it's true," Clee said. "But I'm glad to have my base back. All this suspicion was tiring."

"Yes, mistrust takes energy better spent on other things," Tahl remarked.

"Sir Tahl!" The singsong voice of Tahl's personal navigation droid, TooJay, echoed through the hangar. "You left without me this morning! Look at all the obstacles in this hangar. There is a fusion cutter by your left foot."

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Tahl closed her eyes in exasperation. Usually, TooJay's fussing amused Qui-Gon. But he saw that Tahl was close to the edge now. She had had enough protection for one day.

"Tahl is fine, TooJay," he said quickly.

"Qui-Gon Jinn, hello," TooJay said. "I haven't seen you since I was reprogrammed. Lucky for me they left my memory cells intact."

Qui-Gon stopped. For a moment, he screened out his friends and the chattering droid. *He was missing something. What was it that TooJay said to trigger it?*

First Tahl and Clee talked of mistrust. Then TooJay had mentioned her reprogramming...

Xanatos had placed a surveillance device in TooJay. They had not known that the droid was busy transmitting their conversations to their enemy. They knew a spy was in the Temple, and Obi-Wan had suggested that Tahl could have been the one. But even though it made logical sense, Qui-Gon had never mistrusted her.

Xanatos had never been able to trust anyone. That was his downfall.

So why would he have trusted Bruck? He remembered the feel of Bruck's lightsaber hilt, the worn quality of the carving, the small nick he had felt in the handle. It had touched him at the time, remembering the boy who had spent long hours carving it.

Everything came together then, and he knew how he could turn the tide in Obi-Wan's favor.

He hated to leave Tahl with things unsettled between them. But his Padawan needed him now.

Chapter Nine

Obi-Wan had thought he was prepared for this. He had gone over what had happened with Bruck so many times he felt certain he could give the account smoothly. He even hoped that Vox and Kad Chun would be swayed. They would realize that the painful truth was that Bruck had chosen a dark path.

But it had not turned out that way.

From the moment he sat facing the Senators and tried to tell his story, Sano Sauro had battered him with questions. He had twisted his words. He had made him repeat himself, and if Obi-Wan made the slightest change, he pounced.

Somewhere Sano Sauro had heard that Obi-Wan and Bruck were rivals. Or perhaps he just asked the question, hoping to get an affirmative answer.

"We do not think of rivals at the Temple," Obi-Wan said. "There are certain activities that a few are especially good at. We honor that. Everyone has a special skill. Cooperation is the basis of our order."

"Isn't it true that once you fought a match that was not sanctioned by your teachers? That Bruck beat you badly and you had to hide your wounds?"

Obi-Wan looked at him, startled. How did Sano Sauro know that? The only thing he could think of was that Bruck had told

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Xanatos, and Xanatos had told Vox Chun. "Bruck did not beat me," he said, his eyes flashing. "The fight was a draw."

"So you say." Sano Sauro gave a chilling smile. "But you did fight."

"Bruck wanted to be Qui-Gon Jinn's Padawan. He tried to prevent me from that honor," Obi-Wan said.

Sano Sauro attacked. "So you resented him for that."

Obi-Wan had to tell the truth. "Yes," he said reluctantly. "At the time, I did."

"So Bruck Chun confessed to his Jedi leaders that he'd fought, and you tried to hide it."

Obi-Wan struggled for a moment to come up with the right answer to that question. It was true that a wounded Bruck had gone straight to the med center, but it was only to get Obi-Wan in trouble. Obi-Wan had treated his own wounds himself.

"Is that true or not?" Sano Sauro pressed.

"It is true," Obi-Wan said. "But--"

Sano Sauro twirled around and walked back to his table. "And this was the boy you say was not a rival." He threw a glance at the Senators. Senator Bicon Ransa gave a small nod.

"I did not say that, exactly," Obi-Wan said in a low tone.

"Yes, you tried very hard not to," Sano Sauro replied lightly, with another eloquent glance at the Senators. "But let us move on before we get further snared in Jedi logic. Is it true that you once left the Jedi order?"

Bant threw Obi-Wan a shocked look. Obi-Wan was just as stunned. But why should he be? Obviously Xanatos had pumped Bruck for information, gathering all he could about Qui-Gon and his Padawan. And Xanatos had told Vox.

"Yes," he said in a clear voice.

"And you were not reinstated into the Jedi order at the time of Bruck's death?"

"That is correct," Obi-Wan said.

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Obi-Wan expected more questioning about his leaving the order, but Pi T'Egal interrupted. "Is this relevant to Bruck Chun's death, Sano Sauro?" he asked sternly. "Let us proceed."

"As your honor wishes," Sano Sauro said with a slight bow.

Pi T'Egal turned to Obi-Wan. "Please tell us what happened on that day."

Obi-Wan began. Once again, he described Qui-Gon's plan to foil Xanatos. His pursuit of Bruck to the Room of a Thousand Fountains. Bruck's threat to kill Bant--

Sano Sauro interrupted. "How exactly did he threaten her life?"

"He said that Bant would die, and he didn't have to do anything. And I would have to watch it." Remembering those words, Obi-Wan felt a chill go through him almost as vivid as the one he had felt then. Bant looked down at her clasped hands.

"I see," Sano Sauro said in a tone that indicated he thought Obi-Wan was lying. "And how did you know that this was true? Did you know Bant was dying? Did you know that Bruck would let her die?"

"The Force was very dark in Bruck," Obi-Wan began to explain.

"Ah, the Force! I have been waiting for it to appear in testimony!" Sano Sauro declared, raising his arms. "The famous Force, which tells the Jedi what to do!"

"It does not tell us what to do," Obi-Wan said. "It binds us and connects us--"

"This -- command tells you that a young boy is willing to kill," Sano Sauro answered witheringly. "So therefore you kill him. Because of your mighty Force."

"The Force guided me, yes," Obi-Wan said. "But the Force never guides to kill." He threw a glance at the Senators. Jedi believed in feelings. Here at the hearing they wanted logic and facts. How could he explain that his feelings told him that Bruck had fallen so deeply into Xanatos's web of evil that he would even allow a Jedi student to die in front of his eyes?

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Pi T'Egal and most of the Senators seemed to be listening intently to him without any hint that they were moved by Sano Sauro's sarcasm. But one of the Senators looked uncertain, and Bicon Ransa leaned over to whisper in her ear.

Bant looked at him, alarm in her eyes. She knew he was losing. Obi-Wan felt a sudden sweat drench his tunic. He had lost control of his testimony. Sano Sauro had twisted his words and made him look like a hotheaded fool, or worse, a dangerous liar.

"Sano Sauro, I must caution you," Pi T'Egal said. "The Jedi connection to the Force is well respected in the Senate."

Sano Sauro nodded. "I know this, Senator. Yet this Force is something that no one else can see or feel. It is something we take the Jedi's word for."

"The Jedi word is also something we respect," Senator Vi Callen said severely.

"And is this Force something that we feel confident we can judge a killing on?" Sano Sauro asked, turning to the Senators. His voice rose in intensity as he spoke. "Something only the Jedi can feel, that is used in the defense of this dangerous boy? He says he felt it. We must trust that, and exonerate him? If so, then what have our laws come to, that we mete out justice according to something that we cannot see, hear, feel, or understand? This 'Force'--what is it? What have we seen it do?"

Pi T'Egal looked to the back of the room. "Perhaps Qui-Gon Jinn can help us."

Obi-Wan looked over. Relief coursed through him at the sight of Qui-Gon standing at the back of the room, near the door. Qui-Gon lifted a hand. Bruck's lightsaber hilt suddenly shot from the table and sailed directly into his waiting fingers.

"That is one thing the Force can do," Qui-Gon said, striding forward.

Sano Sauro paled but quickly recovered. "Tricks," he sneered.

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Qui-Gon ignored him. He turned Bruck's hollow lightsaber hilt over in his hands, a look of concentration on his face. Everyone paused, watching him.

"This delay is also a stunt," Sano Sauro said, his voice turning shrill. "Let us continue ..."

"I believe I can help put some questions to rest," Qui-Gon said quietly.

"Ah, now will we hear what the Force told you, Qui-Gon?" Sano Sauro asked.

"No, you will hear Bruck Chun's own words,"

Qui-Gon replied calmly. He turned to the Senators. "As I told you, I knew Xanatos well. He did not trust anyone, even those under his power. He would not have trusted Bruck. He would have made sure that the boy was under his complete control when he sent him back into the Temple to do his work." Qui-Gon lifted the lightsaber hilt. "He would have access to all of Bruck Chun's conversations because he would plant a listening device in the one thing that a Jedi is never without."

Obi-Wan's mouth fell open. How did Qui-Gon figure this out? He stared at the lightsaber hilt, hoping his Master was right.

Vox and Kad Chun looked at each other, startled. Sano Sauro sprang forward. "This is highly irregular! This lightsaber hilt is the property of Vox Chun!"

"This lightsaber hilt is evidence," Pi T'Egal said sternly. "You did not hesitate to employ it in your own service to gain sympathy for your client."

Qui-Gon pressed the nick in the handle and extracted a small disc. "I'll need a recorder."

The court technician took the disc and inserted it into one of the recorders on his desk.

"Let us proceed to the date and time of Bruck's death," Pi T'Egal said.

The court recorder entered the information. A moment later, Obi-Wan heard Bruck's taunting voice.

I was always better than you. Now I am even stronger.

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It all came back in a rush. How he had to struggle to release his anger, how Bruck's words had seared him, how he knew Bruck was trying to anger him. ...Had he truly pushed his anger aside and fought with justice and calm? Sano Sauro had been right about one thing: Bruck had been his rival. There had been a deep animosity between them. He had not been able to conquer it. Even on that rocky slope.

It had been a time when he had been anxious to return to the Jedi. That longing had been a kind of fever in him. Had he told himself that he had fought without anger that day only to convince himself and Qui-Gon that he truly was a Jedi?

There was only the sound of the battle now, the ragged breath of the two of them, the slipping, sliding footwork, the buzz of the lightsabers meeting. Then Bruck's voice again, snaking out, full of venom.

She doesn't look too good, does she?

Kad Chun's shoulders jerked.

Obi-Wan heard his voice on the recorder scream Bant's name. It sounded like him but unlike him, too, the sound of someone on the edge of control, full of desperation.

Bant put her face in her hands.

And then Bruck's voice sang out, triumphant and cruel.

That's right, Obi-Wan. Bant is dying. I won't have to do a thing. I'll just make you watch it. We would have freed her if we got the treasure. But another person will die because of you. Right in front of your eyes.

Pi T'Egal made a slashing gesture at the court recorder. He switched off the machine. "I do not think we need to subject the family to more of this," Pi T'Egal said. "The Senators will listen to the rest in private, confer, and deliver a ruling."

A screen descended from the ceiling, obscuring the Senators. Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon could hear nothing. Vox and Kad Chun kept their backs to them as they conferred with Sano Sauro.

"It will be over soon," Qui-Gon said quietly.

"But how will it end?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Patience," Qui-Gon replied.

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The minutes dragged by, but at last the Senators reappeared. Pi T'Egal looked at Obi-Wan, then at Vox and Kad Chun.

"The death of a young being is always tragic," he said. "The need to blame is understandable. Sometimes it is justified. But we do not think so here. We rule that Obi-Wan Kenobi is free of any responsibility in the death of Bruck Chun."

Chapter Ten

Obi-Wan closed his eyes for an instant. Gratitude washed over him, bringing warmth to his cold skin. It felt as though his blood had been frozen and was at last able to move through his veins again.

Vox Chun spoke to Sano Sauro, but his voice was raised enough to carry throughout the room. "I should have known better than to look for justice here. Once again the Senate bows to the Jedi!"

"There is no cause for celebration or congratulation," Qui-Gon said gently to Bant and Obi-Wan. "We are glad that justice is done. But we have lost a Jedi."

Obi-Wan pressed his lips together and nodded. Now that the relief was wearing off, he realized that the guilt had not left. He had thought the verdict would remove the sense of shame he felt. But he felt no different. The burden he carried was still within him.

"Let us return to the Temple," Qui-Gon said as the Senators filed out. "Come, Obi-Wan."

"In a moment." Obi-Wan suddenly felt a need to be alone. All he had wanted the past few days was his Master and friends around him. Yet now he could not bear to be with them.

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Bant started to say something, but Qui-Gon signaled her to be quiet.

"We will wait for you at the Senate entrance," he said.

Obi-Wan could only nod numbly. He had a sense of Qui-Gon and the others leaving. The table where Sano Sauro and the Chuns had sat was empty. He wondered what he felt. He did not feel much of anything.

"You must be relieved."

Kad Chun spoke behind him. Obi-Wan turned. The boy stood in the aisle, fists clenched, eyes burning.

"Sano Sauro almost got you to reveal the truth," Kad Chun went on. "You hated my brother. All your noble Jedi training failed you. You were glad to see him die."

Obi-Wan shook his head. "No ..."

Kad shot forward unexpectedly. He swung out with his closed fist. The blow hit Obi-Wan on the side of the head near his cheekbone. He staggered back.

Kad swung again, but this time Obi-Wan was able to duck. The blow grazed his ear.

"You killed him," Kad grunted. "The one honor our family had. You killed it."

"I didn't ..." Obi-Wan ducked again and twisted away. He tried to capture Kad Chun's arms.

With a shove that sent Obi-Wan flying back into the table, Kad Chun leaped away. He dodged behind the long table where the Senators had sat so that it was now between him and Obi-Wan.

"Kad, I didn't want your brother to die," Obi-Wan said, his breath ragged. "You heard his own words, you heard what he was willing to do!"

"He was angry! He was taunting you. So what?" Kad screamed. "It doesn't mean he would have done it!"

Obi-Wan shook his head helplessly. Kad worshiped his brother. That was clear. He could not bear to hear the truth about Bruck. He had never known him.

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"He would have done it, Kad," Obi-Wan said. "I am certain of it."

"Who cares what you think!" Kad suddenly leaped onto the Senator's table. In his hand he held the heavy wood and metal staff that Vivendi Allum had used. It was a formidable weapon. With Kad's strength, he could knock Obi-Wan out cold.

Obi-Wan knew he could neatly slice it into pieces with his lightsaber. It would only take moments. Kad was strong, but he was not trained. Obi-Wan could disarm him in a moment. But he would not take up his lightsaber against Bruck's brother.

Kad ran toward him, his face taut with fury.

Obi-Wan watched him run at him with a strange detachment. It was as though he were in a dream. He made no move to dodge. He saw Kad's arm muscles bunch as he lifted the staff, gathering himself for the blow. Obi-Wan still did not move. He saw the staff whistle down toward his skull. ...

At the last second, Kad twisted his wrist. The staff hit the table, splitting it in two. Kad dropped the staff. He stared down at the floor, panting. Then he raised his gaze to Obi-Wan.

"I will never forgive you, Obi-Wan Kenobi," he rasped. "In my eyes, you will always be a killer." He kicked aside the staff and walked up the aisle toward the door.

Obi-Wan stood frozen, Kad's words echoing in his brain. *You will always be a killer.*

No matter how many meditations he had done, no matter how many talks with Qui-Gon he had had, nothing had done him any good. He could not wipe the guilt and shame from deep within himself. He knew that Kad had seen into his heart.

In his own eyes, he was a killer, too.

Twelve Years Later

Chapter Eleven

Obi-Wan moved quickly along the path that ran beside the lake. A fresh breeze moved across his skin and whispered through the branches overhead. Even after all these years, he had to remind himself that the breeze was caused by hidden cooling fans, the dappled shadow on the forest floor created by a series of illumination banks that mimicked the rise and decline of the sun.

His footsteps slowed as he heard the calls and laughter of the Jedi students at the beach along the lake. Although he had received a message that he and Anakin were to report to Yoda, he wanted a few seconds of delay. Anakin had so few opportunities for play. He hated to interrupt him.

They had been heading back from an intense physical workout when Obi-Wan had spied the students from Anakin's year heading to the lake. He had seen the longing in Anakin's eyes as the students dived into the cool water.

"Go ahead," Obi-Wan had told him. "Take some time off."

Anakin had looked at him uncertainly, but Obi-Wan shooed him off. It puzzled and worried Obi-Wan how much time his Padawan spent alone. Anakin had told him that he'd had good friends on Tatooine, especially a human boy named Kitster. He'd been at the Temple for three years now, but he hadn't made one

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close friend, although he was well liked and certainly got along with the other kids.

Obi-Wan had tried to talk to him about it, but the boy would just shut down. His eyes would turn opaque and the corners of his mouth would straighten into a thin line. He would seem very far away. Obi-Wan did not know how to reach him at such times, but they were infrequent and passed as quickly as a rain shower. When they'd met, Anakin had been a warm-hearted nine-year-old boy with an open nature. He was twelve and a half now, and the years had changed him. He had grown to be a boy who hid his heart.

Obi-Wan had tried to show Anakin that friends he would make at the Temple would be his for life. Obi-Wan's friends from his classes--Garen, Reef, and Bant--were now roaming the galaxy. He didn't see them very often. But that deep tie was still there. He wanted the same for Anakin.

Qui-Gon had been dead for three and a half years. Sometimes it seemed like an age, but most of the time it seemed like it had happened yesterday. Especially when he needed his Master's advice. He would always think of Qui-Gon as his Master. Qui-Gon had been torn from him too soon, and Obi-Wan still felt his presence at his shoulder. He even knew what Qui-Gon would say right now.

You cannot make friends for your Padawan, Obi-Wan. You can only show him through your own actions how important connections are to you.

Qui-Gon had done that. Obi-Wan was still running into beings throughout the galaxy who came up to him and spoke reverently or glowingly or humorously of their deep friendship with his Master. Obi-Wan hadn't realized how many connections Qui-Gon had forged with the most unlikely sorts.

Smiling, Obi-Wan paused behind a screen of trees. He couldn't resist a moment to see if Anakin was enjoying himself with the others. He scanned the happy, splashing group with the smile still on his face. It slowly faded as he realized that Anakin wasn't there. With a sigh, Obi-Wan turned away. He hurried to

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the nearest turbolift. He knew where Anakin was. The boy sometimes retreated to his own quarters.

Obi-Wan exited at Anakin's floor and quickly made his way to the boy's quarters. As he reached them, the lower half of a protocol droid rotated out the door on its own. It was followed a moment later by a battered astromech droid, which tottered and then smashed into the wall.

Obi-Wan paused. As expected, a split second later Anakin raced out the door and crashed right into Obi-Wan.

"By the suns, I thought I had it this time," he cried, rebounding off Obi-Wan and crouching by the droid.

"I thought you wanted to swim," Obi-Wan said.

That shuttered look came over Anakin's face. "I had work to do," he muttered.

Obi-Wan crouched by him. "This isn't work, Anakin. It's a hobby. And if you are using it to keep distance between you and your fellow students, it's not a helpful one."

Anakin looked up, his bright eyes keen again. "But I'm *making* things, Master! Look, I've almost got this astromech ready for service."

"Mechanical ability is a valuable skill," Obi-Wan said. "That is not what I meant, and you know it."

"They don't want me," Anakin said flatly. He walked over and slung the legs of the protocol droid under one arm. "I'm not like them."

Obi-Wan couldn't argue. Anakin was unique. There was no question about that. He was an exceptional student, much more in tune with the Force than others his age. He had come late to the Temple. It wasn't that the other students disliked him, they just didn't know what to make of him.

When did it happen? Obi-Wan wondered again. *Why did it happen?* Was it the loss of his mother, followed so closely by the death of Qui-Gon? Obi-Wan could not replace those people in Anakin's heart, nor did he wish to. He had hoped that with Jedi

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training and their own relationship, Anakin would come to find peace. He had not.

"Yoda has requested our presence," he told Anakin, rolling the astromech droid back into Anakin's quarters.

Anakin looked up, excited. "A mission?"

"I don't think so," Obi-Wan said carefully.

Barely two weeks ago, Yoda and Mace Windu had expressed doubts that Anakin was ready for a mission. Anakin lacked discipline, they said. Obi-Wan disagreed. It wasn't so much a lack of discipline that caused Anakin to break rules and send his droids scurrying over the Temple corridors. It was partially boredom, he thought. No matter what he threw at Anakin, the boy mastered it. He needed more challenges. Where Yoda and Mace Windu saw a lack of discipline, Obi-Wan saw an emotional restlessness that could not be cured by hard study or physical trials.

"Straighten your tunic," he admonished. "And wash the grease off your hands."

Anakin scurried to comply, running to the sink in the corner. His quarters were crammed with tools and droid parts. Pieces of a probe droid were scattered over his sleep-couch. A pair of legs for a bipedal droid sat in a corner. Obi-Wan knew that Anakin had found these things by sneaking out of the Temple and dealing in the thriving black market of Coruscant. He preferred to turn a blind eye. So far, Yoda and Mace Windu did as well. But it did not help Anakin's reputation with the Council.

Anakin cleaned up and hurried to keep step with Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan could tell that he was bursting with questions, but uncharacteristically, he did not ask them. Obi-Wan could not have answered them if he had.

Yoda awaited them in a meditation room, the place he favored now for conferences. Obi-Wan knew that Yoda had often met Qui-Gon at his favorite bench in the Room of a

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Thousand Fountains. Yoda never sat there now. It was the only visible sign that Yoda still was in deep mourning for his friend.

"A request the Council has for you both," Yoda announced without preliminaries.

Anakin could not contain his excitement. "A mission?"

Yoda blinked his gray-blue eyes and did not answer. He studied Anakin for a moment. Obi-Wan was often charmed by Anakin's enthusiasm, but it seemed to worry Yoda.

"A mission it is not," Yoda said. "But a voyage you must take. Request we do that you travel to a starship called the *BioCruiser*, a permanent home for a group of people gathered from many worlds in the galaxy. Those on the ship have come from damaged worlds--planets that have become toxic or ravaged by disease or torn apart by criminal gangs or civil war. Land on other worlds they do not. Roam the galaxy they do."

"You mean they live on board a ship?" Anakin's gaze grew wider. "Lucky."

"How do they manage it?" Obi-Wan asked. "What about food and supplies?"

"Grow their own food they do," Yoda answered. "Self-sustaining, they are. But stop they must for fuel and for occasional supplies. Meet them you will at the next docking point. Complaints the Senate has received from the families of those aboard." Yoda drew his robes around him. "Fear they do that their loved ones have been coerced or brainwashed."

"Who leads this group?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Uni is the name he goes by," Yoda answered. "No text doc information can we find about him. Agreed Uni has to a Jedi inspection to calm the worries of the Senate. Danger for you we do not anticipate. Only a few days should this require."

Obi-Wan nodded and kept his skepticism to himself. He had heard these words before, and had been plunged into danger and disarray.

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"So we are to travel far away to a ship where people might be held hostage," Anakin said shrewdly. "It sure sounds like a mission to me."

"A request only," Yoda corrected. Telling them that he would provide further details of the rendezvous soon, Yoda dismissed them. Anakin was silent as they left.

As soon as they rounded the corner, he turned to Obi-Wan, a delighted grin on his face. "My first mission!"

"Request," Obi-Wan said sternly. But he saw Anakin shake his head and silently mouth the word "mission" with a smile.

Chapter Twelve

The next scheduled fuel stop for the *BioCruiser* was on the planet Hilo. Yoda arranged for a transport to pick up Obi-Wan and Anakin at the landing platform.

Obi-Wan stood, looking up last-minute information about Hilo on his datapad. Anakin's gaze remained fixed on the skies of Coruscant; every so often he exclaimed about a ship that zoomed by in the crowded space lanes.

"Master, look at that starship!" he called suddenly. "Have you ever seen such a beauty?"

Obi-Wan looked up. A sleek starship was negotiating the tight traffic lanes, jockeying for position. "A diplomat or Senator's transport, most likely," he said, noting the chromium trim on the sleek black ship. He watched as the skillful pilot found space to slide into the teeming lane, then made a sharp turn to come toward them. To Obi-Wan's surprise, the beautiful ship landed on the Jedi platform.

"Maybe that's our transport!" Anakin cried.

The ramp lowered and a familiar figure strode down toward them.

"Garen!" Obi-Wan was overjoyed to see his friend. It had been several years since Garen had been to the Temple. He hurried toward him, and the two friends clapped their arms

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around each other in a fierce hug. "This is a surprise," Obi-Wan said, quickly taking in his friend's appearance. He was relieved to see that Garen looked as fit and healthy as ever. His hair was still worn long and loose, waving past his collar, and his gaze was as open and warm as Obi-Wan remembered. He knew that Garen had been on a difficult mission in the Outer Rim, though he didn't know the details.

"You look older," Garen said. "But wiser? I'll have to hope for that." His eyes danced.

Obi-Wan grinned. "You haven't changed at all."

"I was sorry to hear about Qui-Gon," Garen said, his mood abruptly changing. "I would have come, but ..."

"It is all right, my friend. It was a great loss for the Jedi."

"And for you."

"Yes. He was my friend as well as my Master," Obi-Wan said. He did not speak of Qui-Gon to many people. He still found it too painful, even after all this time. "But let me introduce you to my Padawan."

"How strange it is to hear you say that," Garen said, smiling. "Now we are old enough to have our own Padawans. Who would have thought it?"

Anakin had been hanging back, studying the ship with avid eyes. When he saw Obi-Wan's welcoming glance, he hurried forward.

"Is this your ship?"

"Anakin," Obi-Wan said reprovingly. "This is my good friend, Jedi Knight Garen Muln. Garen, this is Anakin Skywalker."

"I am honored to meet you at last," Garen said. "No, this isn't my ship. It's a royal starship from the Bimin Three system, on extended loan for the Jedi."

"I knew you'd end up with a starship somehow," Obi-Wan said.

Garen nodded ruefully. Obi-Wan knew he had been bitterly disappointed when the Jedi decided to end the starfighter program. But Garen had gone on to become Clee Rhara's

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Padawan and had distinguished himself on missions throughout the galaxy.

"It turned out for the best," Garen said. "I think in the end the Council was right to oppose the starfighter pilot program. A fleet of starfighters would have brought us trouble."

"Do you mean the Jedi once had a program for starfighter pilots?" Anakin asked, stunned at this news.

"Yes, Anakin, long ages ago, back when Obi-Wan and I were only a little older than you," Garen said, laughing.

"And they *cancelled* it?" Anakin's face showed clearly what he thought of that decision.

"It was for the best," Garen said. "But I must admit it was fun while it lasted."

Anakin gazed at the ship. "How fast does she go?"

"As fast as you want," Garen answered. He looked at Anakin curiously. "Why do you like to go fast, Anakin?"

The dreamy, shuttered look came over Anakin's face. "Because I can leave myself behind," he said, his eyes on the ship.

Garen glanced at Obi-Wan. He raised one eyebrow. It was not a Jedi answer. Obi-Wan frowned, troubled by it. There were still places in Anakin he could not reach.

No. You will reach them. Yoda and Mace Windu are wrong. Qui-Gon was right. Anakin is not too old to learn.

Garen put his hand on Anakin's shoulder. "Let me show you the ship."

"We're waiting for our transport to Hilo," Anakin said, disappointed. "I don't think my Master will allow it."

"Oh, I think he will," Garen said. "*I'm* your transport to Hilo."

Anakin seemed stunned at his good fortune. A delighted grin lit up his face, and he ran ahead to race up the ramp.

Garen picked up Obi-Wan's survival pack. "He seems very young," he observed.

Obi-Wan sighed. "He is getting older every day."

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They came out of hyperspace to a rush of stars. It was Anakin's favorite moment, Obi-Wan knew. He watched the boy's face, alert with interest as Garen piloted the ship toward the atmosphere of Hilo.

Garen whistled. "There she is."

The largest ship Obi-Wan had ever seen rose ahead of them. It seemed to be many ships welded together, made up of different metals and rivets and fasteners, so that dull green gave way to flashing silver to gleaming black. It chugged in a slow, lazy orbit around the planet.

"We're supposed to land on Hilo to pick up a transport back to the ship," Garen said. "Apparently they don't allow outsiders to dock on the ship."

"I've never seen anything like that," Anakin said. He got up from his seat to stand close to the cockpit viewport. He grinned and shot a mischievous look back at Obi-Wan. "It looks like something I might have built."

Obi-Wan had to agree. It had the chunky, cobbled-together look of some of Anakin's practice constructions.

The landing platform loomed ahead, a light freighter parked to one side. As they drew closer, Obi-Wan could see that supplies were being loaded. Garen made his usual perfect landing. He helped Anakin and Obi-Wan gather their packs and walked them down the ramp.

Obi-Wan and Garen exchanged a look of friendship and farewell, one they had exchanged many times over the years.

"May the Force be with you," Garen said. "I can transport you back if you need me. I'll be in this quadrant for a bit."

"May the Force be with you," Obi-Wan told him.

Garen turned and strode up the ramp. He did not turn for a final good-bye. He never did. Only Obi-Wan knew that his old friend hated farewells.

"You are the Jedi inspection team." The tone was curt and businesslike. Obi-Wan turned to see a tall, balding human in a unigarment of pale blue.

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"I am Obi-Wan Kenobi and this is Anakin Skywalker," Obi-Wan answered.

"I am Nort Fandi," the man said. "I am the freighter pilot. We are scheduled to depart. Board the craft. We do not linger on other worlds."

There was no trace of friendliness or courtesy in Nort Fandi's curt tone. Obi-Wan and Anakin boarded the freighter and found seats. In just a few minutes, Nort Fandi and two crew members joined them. Within seconds, they blasted off toward the *BioCruiser*.

"Will you be taking us directly to Uni?" Obi-Wan asked Nort Fandi.

He did not turn. "No. You will be given instructions."

He did not say another word. As they approached the *BioCruiser*, hatch doors slid open in the main ship and Obi-Wan saw the landing area. Nort Fandi slid the freighter inside. The engines powered down.

A short woman in the same pale blue unigarment stood waiting as they walked down the ramp.

"I am Deleta," she said. "I am to show you to your cabins."

"Will we meet with Uni after that?" Obi-Wan asked.

Deleta led them to a bank of turbolifts. "He will contact you shortly."

Obi-Wan picked up no fear or anxiety in the many beings they passed on the way to their sleeping quarters. There were beings from across the galaxy, some wearing the same pale blue garments, some in tunics, some sporting a headdress or leggings from their home worlds. They appeared busy and calm, and he could discern no evidence of thought control. Their gazes were clear and focused as they regarded Obi-Wan and Anakin with lively curiosity.

The Jedi's quarters were small and spare, but with a shared small library, a cubicle for showering, and even a small cooler with fresh juices and snacks.

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"Meals will be brought to you," Deleta said. "Do not wander the ship alone. If you wish a tour, one will be arranged for you shortly."

"How can I contact Uni?" Obi-Wan asked.

"He will contact you shortly," Deleta answered serenely, and left.

"So what do you think "shortly" means here on the cruiser?" Anakin grumbled. He lay back on his sleep-couch on his elbows, his expression sulky. "A year? More?"

"It's been two days," Obi-Wan said. "Each mission takes its own time." He repeated the words automatically. Like Anakin, he, too, felt frustrated. Any additional requests he had made to speak to Uni or even to get a tour of the ship had met with the same "You will be contacted shortly." When he and Anakin had ventured out on their own, they had been politely and firmly escorted back to their quarters and told they would be contacted ... "shortly."

At first Obi-Wan had been reluctant to press the issue. They were guests of the *BioCruiser*, and he never liked to start out a mission by being insistent. But he had his limits, and he had reached them. Obi-Wan pressed the button on the built-in message console. As always, he was addressed by a pleasant, neutral voice.

"May I be of service?"

"I would like to leave a message for Uni," Obi-Wan said.

"He will contact you shortly—"

"Fine. Please inform him that if he does not meet with us in ten minutes I will call back my transport and the full power of the Senate will be unleashed against the *BioCruiser*."

Obi-Wan did not wait for a reply but cut off the connection.

Anakin was now sitting erect. "Will you really do that?"

"Jedi do not threaten," Obi-Wan said. "We inform." He sat calmly, but his eyes were on the chrono. Anything could happen.

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They could be locked inside their quarters. Or Uni could decide to boot them off the ship to the nearest planet.

In exactly eight minutes, the door hissed open. Deleta stood with the same neutral expression on her face.

"Uni will see you now."

Obi-Wan and Anakin followed her through a maze of corridors to a single turbolift. It brought them to a higher level of the ship. They emerged into a deserted hallway.

Deleta accessed a door at the far end of the corridor. They walked into a round room lined with low seating and recessed glow lights. The walls, floors, and furniture were pale blue. Deleta left, the doors hissing shut behind her.

"Do you think this is Uni's private quarters?" Anakin asked in a hushed tone.

"Most likely," Obi-Wan answered.

The doors opened behind him. Obi-Wan saw a tall, slender human walk in. His hair was close-cropped and as white as a moon. His eyes were clear and very blue.

"I am Uni," he said.

But Obi-Wan knew immediately that it was Kad Chun.

Chapter Thirteen

Obi-Wan felt as if his throat had been squeezed. His feet were planted on the floor, or else he could have sworn that he staggered.

"Kad Chun." Obi-Wan spoke his name numbly.

Kad looked just as surprised. He gathered himself with a visible effort. "Obi-Wan Kenobi. I am Uni now."

Kad approached until he was standing close to Obi-Wan, closer than Obi-Wan liked. His pale eyes flickered as he registered the signs of maturity in Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan remembered the face of the boy, burning with hatred in a Senate hearing room.

"So they sent you."

"Yes."

"I suppose they do not know who I am."

"No."

"Kad Chun is no more."

Obi-Wan's curiosity overcame his caution. "How did you come to be here?"

Kad turned and began to stroll about the room. He did not give Anakin a glance, but the boy watched him steadily.

"After the hearing, my father and I returned to Telos. We led a quiet life, recovering from our double tragedy--the loss of our

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son and brother, and the inability of the Senate to bring his killer to justice."

Obi-Wan stiffened, but Uni did not look at him, just strolled about, picking up an object here or there, studying it and putting it down.

"Many good things happened on Telos. I understand you were there at the beginning. A new government was formed, and the reclamation of our natural resources began. But as the years passed it became clear that the corruption that had destroyed our institutions and government had taken a deeper hold than the good people of Telos imagined. Special interests again took over. Telos began a steep decline. Corporations owned our natural resources and plundered them."

"I am sorry to hear this," Obi-Wan said.

"I found myself in a position of some leadership," Kad went on. "I gathered followers. I knew it was too late to save Telos. We were wasting our time. We could never fight that kind of power. In order to save the remaining examples of responsibility and honor on Telos, we had to bring the last of the best with us. Which we did. We boarded a ship, taking our plants and minerals with us. We traveled through the galaxy. We did not look for another world. We did not need one. As we traveled I saw that Telos was not unique. So many worlds in the galaxy are corrupt. The noblest beings protest and are drowned out. We welcomed them aboard. Our core ship began to grow. We have the most brilliant scientists, the greatest innovators, teachers, poets, musicians, doctors. We all believe that given the state of the galaxy the only choice for the best of us is to disengage from it completely. After the galaxy destroys itself we will be the seed for a new community."

Kad turned at last. His pale blue eyes burned with fervor. "So you see no one here is held against their will. They can leave at any time at our next docking port. We are working on a renewable fuel that we can produce on the ship, but we haven't been able to perfect it. So we must still stop occasionally. We

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hope one day to be completely self-sufficient. We will not ever need to have contact with another world. Until then we must deal with the tiresome demands of the Senate. I consider it demeaning to the intelligence of all who live aboard this ship. Nevertheless, I will cooperate."

"You will allow us access throughout the ship?"

Kad nodded. "I will arrange a tour so you can get an overview. After that, you are free to wander on your own."

"We can speak to any of your followers?"

Kad frowned. "I do not use the word followers."

"These beings are here because of your philosophy?"

"A philosophy they have adopted as their own." Kad raised an eyebrow. "And what about the Jedi? How different are we from you? Yet the Senate does not send envoys to investigate you, I notice."

"We are very different. We lead lives of contemplation but also engagement," Obi-Wan said in the even tone he adopted when he was irritated. "We do not isolate ourselves and abandon the galaxy."

"Yes, you still believe you can do good," Kad said carelessly. "Everyone on this ship felt that way once."

Obi-Wan sensed that disengaging was a good philosophy to adopt at that moment. He knew it was fruitless to argue with Kad and knew that Kad's carelessness was studied. He was goading Obi-Wan. No doubt he knew that Obi-Wan's calm was also a mask.

"I am sorry you consider this process demeaning," Obi-Wan said carefully. "But I'm sure you must realize that there are family members throughout the galaxy who have to deal with the sudden disappearance of their loved ones. Communication has been infrequent."

"That is because no one understands our vision," Kad said impatiently. "Everyone here is an adult, capable of making their own decisions. Now, I suggest that you and your *follower* proceed to the bridge, where I have arranged for one of us to give you a

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tour of the ship. Take the turbolift to Level four and you will be met there."

The doors opened again. A frail old man walked slowly into the room. His scalp gleamed in the light, and his hooded eyes were dull. It took Obi-Wan several seconds to remember Vox Chun. He was startled at how much he had aged.

Vox Chun's dull gaze suddenly blazed into rage. It was obvious that his hatred of Obi-Wan had not diminished with the years.

"Father, the Jedi team is proceeding to the bridge for a tour," Kad said quickly. Obi-Wan saw that he wanted to forestall any outburst.

Obi-Wan nodded at Vox Chun, who did not return the greeting. He kept his burning gaze on Obi-Wan as he and Anakin crossed the room and walked out the doors.

The doors shut behind them. Anakin looked up at him.

"Why do they hate you?"

"Old history," Obi-Wan said. "Missions can leave grievances behind. I do not think it will affect the present."

Anakin nodded, but Obi-Wan could tell he was not satisfied; he believed that old grievances *would* affect this mission.

The trouble was, so did Obi-Wan. It was not the first time that Obi-Wan found it inconvenient to have such an astute Padawan.

Chapter Fourteen

Anakin trudged alongside Obi-Wan, wondering about the title of Padawan Learner. That implied that he was supposed to learn, didn't it? How could he learn when he never had the full story?

Yoda was full of riddles. Mace Windu spoke in hints and allusions. Even his Master deflected most talk of the past, except for affectionate or respectful references to his old Master. Sometimes it seemed to Anakin that everyone at the Temple spoke a different language from the one he knew. It was at such times that he missed his mother's warm clarity. But remembering Shmi brought back an ache so deep it never went away.

"At least we'll get a tour of the ship," Obi-Wan remarked as they waited for the turbolift. "You've been wanting to explore it."

"But we'll have a guide," Anakin said. "They probably won't show us the whole thing. Wouldn't you rather explore on your own?"

"Sometimes it is helpful to see what your opponent wishes you to see," Obi-Wan said, stepping into the turbolift. "It can indicate what he is trying to hide."

Anakin stood quietly as the levels ticked off. He was still out of sorts from first being ignored in the meeting between Obi-Wan and Uni, and then not being told the truth by Obi-Wan. He had felt the dark anger from both Vox and Uni, the man Obi-

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Wan called Kad. Those two held more than a simple grievance against his Master. Why didn't Obi-Wan trust him enough to tell him the truth? The turbolift doors opened and Anakin got another surprise. Obi-Wan broke into a broad smile at the sight of a slender woman standing waiting for them.

"Is it Andra?" he asked.

The woman looked just as surprised and pleased. "Obi-Wan Kenobi!"

Obi-Wan and the woman stepped forward. Andra grasped Obi-Wan's hand. "I have never forgotten you."

"What a surprise to see you here," Obi-Wan said. "I imagined you would be ruler of Telos by now."

Andra's face darkened. "The Telos I fought for is gone. My life is here now."

"Yes, Kad told me how it deteriorated."

"We call him Uni now. Yes, we defeated Offworld, but other equally powerful concerns took over. I watched my beautiful planet deteriorate for the second time. I could do nothing. My rage and frustration turned to deep sorrow. It was as though I was in a dark place with no way out. Then I met Uni." Andra shook her head as if to dislodge dark memories. "Uni gave me a reason to live." She looked over at Anakin and smiled. "And who is this?"

"This is my Padawan, Anakin Skywalker."

Andra gave him a warm nod of greeting. Anakin liked her immediately. He felt a kind of warmth and acceptance from her that reminded him of Shmi.

"So you have your own Padawan now," she said, the smile still on her face as she glanced at Obi-Wan. "Qui-Gon must miss you."

Obi-Wan's bright gaze dimmed. "Andra, Qui-Gon is dead. Three years now."

Her smile vanished, and sorrow filled her eyes. "I did not know. I am so sorry. The galaxy is diminished without him."

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"Yes," Obi-Wan said. "That is exactly how I feel. But what about Den? Still getting on your nerves?"

"I'm afraid so," Andra said ruefully. "I married him."

Obi-Wan laughed. Den and Andra were an odd match, but Qui-Gon had seen how much deep love there was between them. "Is he aboard the *BioCruiser* as well?"

"Of course. He was resistant at first. But he came to see the truth of Uni's teachings." Andra paused. "You must be the Jedi come to inspect us. I am to give you the tour."

"I can ask for no better guide," Obi-Wan said.

Anakin hurried forward as Andra turned to walk down the corridor with them. "How do you two know each other?" he asked her. Better to ask Andra than Obi-Wan. He'd get a more complete story.

"Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon helped our world when it was dying," Andra explained. "A mining corporation called Offworld had secretly bought up our national park spaces and had begun to mine them. I was part of the underground then—"

"A one-woman underground," Obi-Wan said admiringly.

"True, I didn't have many followers at the time," Andra said ruefully. "Just a thief and gambler short on ethics and long on charm. He became my husband, Den. Despite the fact that we were outlaws, Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon trusted us. They exposed Offworld, and the people got control of our sacred spaces again. Or so we thought. In the end, we lost the battle."

Andra stopped in the middle of the circular bridge. "But I'll never forget what they did for us."

"And what you *did* for *us*," Obi-Wan pointed out. "You saved us from execution."

"Execution?" Anakin asked, staring at Obi-Wan, wide-eyed.

"Xanatos was a terrible enemy," Andra said softly.

"Xanatos?" Anakin asked.

"A story for another time," Obi-Wan said firmly.

Andra nodded, understanding that Obi-Wan wished to change the subject. She gestured at the busy workers surrounding them

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and the banks of controls. "As you can see, our bridge is more complicated than most starships'. The *BioCruiser* is made of different components, some of them originally designed to run differently from others'. Here is where everything is coordinated. Already our scientists have discovered a number of technological breakthroughs. The size and complexity of the ship is unprecedented."

"Do you have a defense system?" Obi-Wan asked.

Andra nodded. "State of the art. We have a valuable treasury aboard. Each of us brought all our assets aboard when we joined. We use that money for research and development. Eventually, we want to be a fully self-sustaining ship, as though we were a floating planet."

"Most planets are not fully self-sustaining," Obi-Wan pointed out. "They depend on trade and the free exchange of information."

"When you open your doors to the galaxy, you invite corruption to overtake you," Andra said, shaking her head. "I have seen it happen on Telos. I have talked to many aboard who have seen it happen on their own worlds. Criminal gangs grow more powerful every day in the galaxy. More and more, giant corporations gobble up natural resources. They just move on to the next planet ripe for exploitation. I believe that Uni is right. This," Andra concluded, spreading her arms to take in the ship, "is our greatest hope. Now, let us proceed. We have much to see."

Anakin had never seen such a fascinating ship. It was crowded with beings from all over the galaxy, and there seemed to be plenty to do. Most of the beings worked at least part of the day, either in the tech centers, scientific labs, or service industries. There were all kinds of restaurants and cafés, with food from many worlds. There were game rooms and libraries and music rooms. One whole area of the *BioCruiser* was devoted to the Collection Center, where plants, flowers, and animals from many

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worlds were kept. Anakin could not imagine ever being bored. He wasn't sure how he felt about Uni's philosophy, but he thought living aboard a ship would be outstanding.

The tour took several hours. Andra left them at their quarters.

"I hope you can tell the Senate that we wish no harm. All aboard are here of their free will," she said to Obi-Wan.

"I hope so as well," Obi-Wan answered politely.

Andra cocked her head. "Ah. I had forgotten how noncommittal the Jedi can be."

"We reserve our judgment until we can speak plainly," Obi-Wan said. "We enjoyed the tour, Andra. Thank you."

"I'll tell Den you're aboard. I'm sure he'd like to see you." With a last friendly wave, Andra headed off.

As soon as she was gone, Anakin turned to Obi-Wan. "Who is Xanatos?"

The question seemed to startle Obi-Wan. But Anakin had sensed something when Andra had mentioned the name. He had felt something from Obi-Wan, something he wanted to know more about.

"Not now," Obi-Wan said.

"Shortly?" Anakin asked, discouraged. "I keep hearing that word. Why won't you tell me now? Is there some reason I can't know?" Again, he felt frustrated. It was hard to penetrate Obi-Wan's reserve.

Obi-Wan studied him for a moment. "No," he said finally. "There is no reason you can't know. Xanatos was a former apprentice of Qui-Gon's. He turned to the dark side. He used the Force to build his own power. He was the head of the Offworld Mining Corporation and laid waste to whole worlds. Life meant nothing to him."

"Is he still alive?" Anakin asked.

"He died on Telos," Obi-Wan answered. "He preferred to take his own life rather than surrender to Qui-Gon." He studied Anakin for a moment. "Now let's clean up and go out for the evening meal."

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Anakin went into his quarters. He felt a buzzing in his head, as if his thoughts were so numerous and confused that they could not register. He could not take in what Obi-Wan had told him. He could not imagine that such a thing could happen. How could a Jedi turn to the dark side? How could a Padawan betray his Master? If he hadn't heard the story from Obi-Wan, he would have refused to believe it.

At last Obi-Wan had shared something real with him. There were times, especially early on, when Anakin questioned Obi-Wan's motive in taking him on as Padawan. He knew Obi-Wan had done it because it was Qui-Gon's wish. Was he a burden to Obi-Wan? Just a promise made to a dying friend? More than anything, Anakin longed to have the kind of bond with Obi-Wan that his Master had had with Qui-Gon. There were times when that closeness seemed very far away.

Chapter Fifteen

Alone in his cabin, Obi-Wan splashed cold water on his face. When he raised his head and gazed into the small mirror over the sink, he was almost surprised to see his mature face. He had been plunged back into his boyhood twice today. It left him feeling rocked and tentative, as though he was once again that thirteen-year-old boy.

Seeing Andra was a pleasure. It brought back a satisfying memory. The mission on Telos had been treacherous, but Obi-Wan remembered it as a time when he and Qui-Gon had begun to rebuild the bonds between them after he had left the Jedi and his Master for a short time. They had worked together in the old rhythm, and for the first time since Obi-Wan had left, Qui-Gon had truly welcomed him back. He had made Obi-Wan feel that their bond was strong and would grow even stronger. As it did.

But Kad ... *Uni*, Obi-Wan corrected himself. That confrontation had been less pleasant. He still remembered the hate in Kad's eyes, the sound of the table splintering as the rod came down, the knowledge that this boy wanted to kill him. And how he had waited for the blow, defenseless, feeling that in some way if the blow fell he would at last be at peace with Bruck's death. He would have paid a debt.

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He had never told Qui-Gon about that moment. It was not the way a Jedi should think, or feel. He should have felt peace with the outcome of his battle with Bruck. But, Obi-Wan thought, staring bleakly at his mature reflection, twelve years later he still had no peace.

He wrenched his mind back to the present. He had noted his Padawan's admiration of the workings of the *BioCruiser*. There was much to admire. But Obi-Wan was disturbed by Uni's philosophy. To his mind, the *BioCruiser* held a gathering of disillusioned idealists. Uni's philosophy of withdrawal was based in anger and bitter disappointment. He did not like the change in Andra. He remembered her as a fierce defender of her planet. Had Uni caught her in such a low time in her life that he had tapped into her bitterness and sense of futility?

Obi-Wan had been on missions that had seemed hopeless at the start. He had seen criminals win, of course. He had seen civil war tear worlds apart. But he had also seen beings band together to fight for their planet and succeed against impossible odds. Uni's philosophy did not impress him. Uni was a cynic hiding behind a veil of idealism.

He was also disturbed by the idea that all who joined the *BioCruiser* donated their wealth to the treasury. Andra had said this offhandedly, but Obi-Wan had to wonder who controlled such vast sums and who had access to them. Kad? His father? He still did not trust Vox Chun. Despite his supposed rehabilitation, Obi-Wan did not forget his part in the plundering of Telos. He was surprised that Andra could. She seemed to have left her healthy skepticism back on her home planet.

Still deep in thought, Obi-Wan fetched Anakin and suggested the nearby café for the evening meal. He would like a chance to observe the inhabitants of the *BioCruiser* when they were relaxed and at ease.

Anakin was soon engrossed in his food, which was fresh and delicious. Food meant less to Obi-Wan as he grew older. He had come to realize what a good Master Qui-Gon had been, in small

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ways as well as large ones. Qui-Gon had treated him as a Jedi, but never forgot he was a growing boy. If he hadn't had Qui-Gon's example, Obi-Wan wondered if he'd be as sensitive to Anakin's needs as he tried to be.

Obi-Wan ate methodically. He glanced casually around the crowded room, but he was alert and attuned to every gesture. He watched carefully how the various diners interacted with one another.

Suddenly a tall man plopped down in a chair opposite him, a wide grin creasing his rugged face. "So. What are the odds?"

Obi-Wan grinned back. "Den!"

"It's good to see you again, my friend. If someone told me you'd end up on this rust-bucket, I never would have taken the bet." Den grinned amiably at Anakin. "Hey there, kid. I heard you like big ships."

"I like most ships," Anakin said, his mouth full.

"Not me. I prefer to have my feet on the ground."

"So what are you doing here?" Obi-Wan asked, pushing his empty plate away. Den looked only a little older than he had all those years before. His sandy hair was still boyishly tousled, and the smile lines around his eyes were only a little deeper. Den's pleasant expression did not falter.

"Escaping the horrors of corruption and environmental degradation. What about you?"

"Investigating you," Obi-Wan shot back. He had forgotten the bumpy rhythms of Den's speech, the way he seemed to treat no subject seriously. He remembered how Qui-Gon had accepted Den immediately and had been amused by him. It had taken Obi-Wan a bit longer to get used to the fact that they were depending on a thief to help them on an important mission.

"Yes, Andra told me," Den said. "Why don't I walk you back to your quarters?"

Obi-Wan nodded. Anakin combined the three remaining bites on his plate into one and hurriedly crammed it into his mouth. Still chewing, he followed Obi-Wan and Den from the café.

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"Tell me how you truly feel," Obi-Wan said quietly to Den as they strolled down the corridor.

Den sighed. "I only joined up because I didn't want to lose Andra."

"Ah," Obi-Wan said. Den had confirmed what he'd suspected. He couldn't imagine independent Den surrendering to someone else's idea of how to live.

"The ironic thing is, I was the one to make her go to Uni's lecture," Den went on. "She was in a bad state, Obi-Wan. You have to understand that many felt the same. Telos was dying, and no one could save it. Uni offered hope. Andra was one of the first organizers of the *BioCruiser*." Den made a wry face. "She had a cause again."

"You tried to talk her out of going?"

"Sure. I told her we should stay and fight for Telos. Or emigrate to another world, not reject the galaxy and become crazy nomads. Naturally she agreed to everything I said. Joke! Since when does Andra ever agree with me?" Den asked morosely. "I had no choice. I pretended to swallow this wacky idea, and I came aboard. Something didn't smell right to me, and it still doesn't. Listen, I may have gone straight for Andra's sake, but the criminal antennae never die. There's something wrong with this operation."

"Tell me," Obi-Wan urged.

Den waved cheerfully at a group across the corridor. "Things just don't feel right. I'm not sure about Uni, but Vox definitely has my antennae quivering. He managed to convince everyone on Telos that he had nothing to do with handing our sacred spaces over to Offworld, even though he was in Xanatos's pocket. He keeps to himself on the *BioCruiser*, stays up in those fancy quarters of his. But twice I've spotted him having a pretty intense conversation with a tech worker named Kern."

"Why is that suspicious?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Vox thinks he's too good for the rest of us," Den said, his eyes narrowing. "Why would he waste his time talking to some

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low-level tech worker?" Den tapped his nose. "I'm telling you. Doesn't smell right."

"Anything else?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Whenever we dock for fuel and supplies, it's always at some industrial planet," Den said. "Why is that? And why is Vox always among the landing party?"

"He wasn't back at Hilo," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"Yeah. I noticed that. I figure he didn't want to ride back with the Jedi team. Maybe he thought it would be suspicious if he went down. Who knows?" Den tapped his nose again and wrinkled his face as if he'd smelled something foul.

They stopped in front of their quarters. Anakin's eyes were on Den. Obi-Wan could see the boy was listening intently.

"I don't know, Den," Obi-Wan said. "You don't have much for us to go on."

"Did you know that one of the reasons we stopped at Hilo was to do a repair that didn't need to be done?" Den asked. "It turned out to be a readout malfunction. The actual part was fine."

"That happens--"

"--sometimes, I know. But guess who's in charge of readout systems? Kern."

Obi-Wan nodded, but he still wasn't convinced. He sensed that Den was searching for anything that would prove that the *BioCruiser* operation was corrupt. His desire to have his wife back could be coloring his perceptions.

"Now that you're here, my odds of getting to the bottom of this just improved a thousand percent," Den said, slapping Obi-Wan on the back. "Get a good night's sleep. You'll need it."

Den gave them a cheerful wave and hurried off. Obi-Wan sighed.

"You don't trust him?" Anakin asked.

"It's not that," Obi-Wan said. "I'm just not sure I trust his perceptions."

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"But he's thinking like a Jedi," Anakin pointed out. "He's trusting his feelings. Shouldn't we honor that? Besides, we don't have any other paths to follow at the moment."

Sometimes, Anakin reminded Obi-Wan of Qui-Gon. He had the same mix of logic and emotion that Obi-Wan struggled so hard to balance.

"I trust my *own* feelings," Obi-Wan finally muttered. "Not Den's."

Chapter Sixteen

Obi-Wan and Anakin had barely finished their morning meal when Den came to Obi-Wan's quarters.

"I have a way to break into the text-doc files on the *BioCruiser*," Den announced.

"I thought you had given up being a criminal," Obi-Wan said.

Den shrugged. "I was bored. It's been a long time since I got a chance to flex my muscles." His eyes twinkled. "Don't you want to see Kern's background?"

"If the Senate finds out that the Jedi illegally broke into the *BioCruiser's* confidential records, it could compromise the investigation," Obi-Wan said with a frown. "I don't think--was Den flourished a sheaf of durasheets. "Too late! I printed out the information for you."

"Great!" Anakin enthused. "Now we can start."

Den grinned. "I like your style, kid."

With a sigh, Obi-Wan took the durasheets. He quickly glanced through the information, absorbing it. Then he handed it to Anakin.

"You see the problem?" Den asked Obi-Wan.

He nodded.

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"I don't get it," Anakin said. "Everything seems in order to me. He's got top-level security clearance. From the Senate, even. Isn't that hard to get?"

"Yes," Obi-Wan said. "*Very* hard. That's why there's a problem."

"Why would a low-level tech worker like Kern need high-security clearance from the Senate?" Den asked.

"It's odd, but it doesn't necessarily have significance," Obi-Wan said. "It probably just means that he worked on sensitive material at one point. Everyone has a past."

Den collapsed in a nearby chair. "If you're going to think that everything I bring you is useless, we're not going to get anywhere."

"Relax, Den. I didn't say we wouldn't follow up." Motioning to Anakin, Obi-Wan stood. "As a matter of fact, I'd like a more complete tour this morning. Do you think you can lead us to the tech center?"

Den indicated Kern with a nod as they entered the tech center. He was a good ten years older than Obi-Wan, with close-cropped light hair and eyes set close together.

"This is our info-tech center," Den began. "As you might imagine, the readout panels are extensive. Every single aspect of the ship is monitored, from damage control to how our plants are growing in the greenhouses."

"A complex operation," Obi-Wan observed. He gave Anakin a look. He had already briefed his Padawan on what he should do.

While Den continued to talk and Obi-Wan murmured admiring comments or questions, Anakin slipped away. He stood examining a readout console. When he knew Kern was looking at him, he glanced up and caught his eye.

"I've never seen a board like this one," he said.

"It's a big ship." Kern turned away, bored by the prospects of conversation with a young boy.

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"Do the readout monitors really capture every single thing that could go wrong?" Anakin asked.

"Yes."

"Are there separate readouts for every engine part?"

"Yes."

"The thrust trace dampers, even?" Anakin pitched his voice high. He had an ability to seem younger than he was.

"Yes," Kern said, exasperation coloring his voice. "Go away, Jedi kid, I'm busy."

"Let's say your power core overheats, but there's no emergency readout on the converters, and the hyperdrive conduits show a steady lightspeed. Would your readout take into account a faulty hydrostatic field connector?"

Kern swiveled in his chair. "You know a lot for a kid."

"Do you know the answer?" Anakin asked.

"I'd check the readout for the hydrostatic field connector, but first I'd investigate the drive turbine air intake," Kern said. "We've got a couple of sublight engines of the Dyne class, and sometimes those flaps can get gunky if the fuel lines get clogged. Okay, kid?"

"Okay," Anakin said cheerfully.

He joined up with Obi-Wan and Den, who was concluding the tour. As soon as they were outside, he repeated the conversation to Obi-Wan.

"I'm telling you, something's up with this guy," Den said. "Readout tech workers are totally separate from motor experts. They don't know about sublight engines. They just send the information to the mechanics."

"He could have worked on engines before," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"But it doesn't say that in his text doc," Den shot back.

Obi-Wan frowned. "I know. Let's go back to my cabin."

It was at times like this that Obi-Wan missed Tahl. When he'd been with Qui-Gon, they could always rely on Tahl to do an

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exhaustive search, using all her contacts. She inevitably turned up clues that brought them to the next step. And she'd done it fast.

He didn't know Tnani Ikon, the Jedi Knight now in charge of computer searches at the Temple. But Obi-Wan called him and quickly told him that they needed deep research on Kern, sending Tnani all the text-doc information they already had. He asked for priority, but he could never be sure what other Jedi missions were at stake. Obi-Wan cut the communication but did not put away his comlink.

"What is it?" Anakin asked.

"I have an idea." Obi-Wan contacted Tnani again. "While you're doing the search, can you also investigate any Kerns who have died within the last twenty years?"

The impassive Jedi Knight did not question Obi-Wan. "I will do so."

Obi-Wan cut the communication again. Den looked at him quizzically.

"What was that about? Sure, the guy is ugly, but he doesn't look dead," Den said.

"I'm still thinking about that high security clearance," Obi-Wan said, tucking his comlink back into his utility belt. "I remember that Qui-Gon told me that there are secret operatives called "no-names" who are used by the Senate. They use fabricated identities that are retired when they die. Except Qui-Gon knew of several cases where if someone had enough money or influence they could buy a retired identity." Obi-Wan shrugged. "Maybe Kern is a purchased identity. It's worth checking into."

"I knew I needed you!" Den said, clapping Obi-Wan on the back.

"But if Kern is a bought identity, that means that somebody powerful wanted him to infiltrate this ship," Anakin said. "Who could it be? And why?"

"That," Obi-Wan said, "just might turn out to be the most important question of all."

Chapter Seventeen

Den had to return to his job--"They've got me raising vegetables, can you believe that?"--so while he was waiting for Tnani to reply, Obi-Wan suggested to Anakin that they strike up conversations with some of the residents of the *BioCruiser*. They spoke to as many beings as they could--a librarian, a tech worker, a teacher, a former ruler of her planet who was now an administrator aboard ship. Each of them spoke glowingly of Uni and their life aboard the *BioCruiser*. Each of them looked at their decision to leave their worlds as a kind of salvation.

"What do you think?" Obi-Wan asked Anakin as they headed to a nearby café for the midday meal. "Do they seem brainwashed to you?" He was always curious about Anakin's perceptions. Often he was startled to discover they were sharper than his own. Anakin saw things intuitively, while Obi-Wan knew he had a tendency to overanalyze.

"Not brainwashed," Anakin said. "Just sad, somehow."

"Sad?"

"Well, they gave up. That's always sad, isn't it? And leaving your family and friends behind makes you sad, too. They push it way down. But it's there. It's there in their dreams. Where else can it go?"

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Intrigued, Obi-Wan mulled over Anakin's words. He would not have phrased it that way or perhaps even formed the same thoughts, but Anakin had put his finger on what was bothering him.

The only trouble was, they couldn't bring a charge of "instituting sadness" back to the Senate. They hadn't really found any evidence against Uni.

A group of security officers suddenly wheeled around the corner in lockstep. Obi-Wan watched them curiously at first. Then his instinct kicked in. The officers were coming for the Jedi.

The officers were armed with blasters (still in their holsters) and electro-jabbers (in their hands). Anakin had picked up on the disturbance in the Force a beat later than Obi-Wan. He tensed and glanced at his Master, uncertain of what to do. Obi-Wan didn't want to engage with security aboard the vessel. This was to be a peaceful investigation, nothing more.

The lead security officer brandished his electro-jabber. "You must come with us."

"On whose authority?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Uni's. Now move."

The officer raised his electro-jabber and moved toward Anakin. Obi-Wan saw that he meant to use it. Such a blow could paralyze Anakin's arm or leg for some time. The security officer didn't have a chance to blink. Obi-Wan's lightsaber was activated and moving before the electro-jabber had shifted even a few centimeters. The lightsaber neatly cleaved the jabber in two. The officer crashed to his knees from the strength of the blow. He was unhurt, but dazed.

Immediately the other security officers sprang forward. Anakin had already whirled away from the first officer and drawn his lightsaber. It was only a training lightsaber on loan from the Temple, but even its low power was effective.

"No harm, only disarm," Obi-Wan had a chance to murmur before he flipped backward to avoid a security officer who tried

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to come at him from his left. Obi-Wan turned, his lightsaber a blur of heat and energy, and turned the electro-jabber into a smoking heap on the floor.

Anakin's training lightsaber circled and whirled before an upward sweep sent the third officer's electro-jabber crashing to the floor in two molten piles. Obi-Wan and Anakin sprang forward to defend themselves against the last two officers, who stumbled backward, unnerved by the display of Jedi skill. One dropped his electro-jabber and fumbled for his blaster. Obi-Wan cleaved the other's electro-jabber in two and turned the blade of the lightsaber close to the last officer's face.

"Do you really want to draw that weapon?" he asked.

The security officer's eyes wobbled. He licked his lips. "Not-no."

"We will come with you voluntarily," Obi-Wan said, looking at each officer in turn. "Do you understand?"

The first officer stood. "We are well trained," he said to Obi-Wan. "We just never met Jedi before. If you'll follow us ..."

Obi-Wan deactivated his lightsaber and motioned for Anakin to do the same.

The security officers formed a wary guard around them. The first officer marched toward the turbolift.

"What do you think this is about?" Anakin murmured.

"I have no idea," Obi-Wan answered. "Either we've violated some rule, or Uni has decided he's had enough investigation."

They proceeded to the upper level and were marched to Uni's quarters. The doors slid open. The security officers lined up against the back wall. Vox and Uni stood in the middle of the room, waiting for them. Obi-Wan could see that Vox was trembling with rage.

"As always, we see that we cannot trust the Jedi," Vox spat out. "We invited you to share our home, and you have betrayed us. Our confidential files have been broken into!"

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Den, Obi-Wan thought in despair. He should have remembered that Den hadn't been the most accomplished thief, even when it had been his profession.

"You are accusing us?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Of course I am accusing you!" Vox almost screamed.

"We did not break into your files," Obi-Wan said honestly.

"Can you tell me you were not involved?" Vox sneered. He waved a hand. "Never mind. My son and I know firsthand how the Jedi order twists the truth--"

"We don't!" Anakin burst out. "Jedi don't lie."

Vox gave Anakin a contemptuous glance. "What do you know, boy? Has your Master told you how he killed another Jedi student and then lied about it? Ah, I thought not."

"That's not true," Anakin shot back.

"The past is not at issue here," Uni said, placing a hand on his father's arm. "We are speaking of right now. You have violated our trust, Obi-Wan Kenobi. We demand that you summon your transport to collect you. Until then, you are confined to your quarters." Uni spoke more calmly than his father, but Obi-Wan could see the hard fury in his eyes. He picked up a sense of triumph as well, as though Uni had been waiting for Obi-Wan to misstep. He was exhilarated to have an excuse to toss the Jedi off his ship. Things were still personal between them.

"I am here on the Senate's behalf," Obi-Wan tried. "If you order us to leave before our investigation is complete, a fuller investigation will follow. The Senate will not take kindly to this, especially since you have no evidence that we were involved."

A flicker of worry passed over Uni's face, but Vox waved his hand as if flapping away a pesky insect. "We are not worried about that," Vox said. "The Senate does not frighten us."

"Contact your return transport right now," Uni said. "We do not allow outsiders to dock on our ship, but we will make an exception. Then we must confiscate your comlink."

Obi-Wan considered his options. They could resist. Escape from this room would be easy. He was not threatened in the least

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by the security officers in the room, although no doubt Uni and Vox gained comfort from their presence.

But where would they go? They could hide on the ship. Den would help them. But what would that accomplish? He had not seen any evidence that beings aboard the *BioCruiser* were mistreated. There was no compelling reason for him to defy Uni and Vox at this point.

The veiled triumph in Uni's gaze now blazed into life. He had Obi-Wan cornered, and he knew it.

Obi-Wan reached for his comlink and activated it. He punched in Garen's frequency.

"We are done here," he said. "We need a pickup." He gave Garen the coordinates that Uni handed him.

"That was fast. You're lucky. I'm nearby, in the Tentrax system. I can be there in an hour," Garen replied.

They cut the communication. Uni nodded in satisfaction and held out his hand. Obi-Wan put his comlink into it. He then turned to Anakin. After a nod from Obi-Wan, Anakin placed his comlink in Uni's hand.

"These will be returned to you before your departure," Uni said.

"Unlike you, we are not thieves," Vox sneered.

"The security officers will escort you back to your quarters," Uni said. "I will not be seeing you again, Obi-Wan Kenobi." For the first time, he smiled. "I must admit I am glad of it."

Chapter Eighteen

Obi-Wan requested that Anakin be allowed to remain with him in his quarters. After a second of hesitation, the first security officer agreed. The door hissed shut, and they were alone.

"Do we really have to leave?" Anakin asked.

"We have an hour," Obi-Wan said. "We should be able to find something out in that time. I wish Uni hadn't asked for our comlinks. We need to hear from Tnani about the background check on Kern."

"But what can we do locked in here?" Anakin asked.

"They didn't take our lightsabers," Obi-Wan pointed out. "I think they knew we would not give them up voluntarily. We can get out if we have to. But I don't think we'll need to cut our way out."

Anakin grinned. "Den?"

Obi-Wan nodded. "I'm sure he'll be along. Now, what were your conclusions about the meeting?"

Anakin sat on a chair and focused his concentration. "Vox was afraid," he said at last.

Obi-Wan nodded. "Good."

"It is hard to separate fear from anger," Anakin went on slowly. "Yet I sensed the fear propelling the anger."

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"We don't know if he can pinpoint that we were looking for information on Kern," Obi-Wan said. "I have to assume that Den was smart enough to cover his tracks in that area. But he knows we were searching the text-doc files. That was enough to unnerve him. It's a good sign. Den was right. Something *is* wrong here. Anything else?"

"The point where he *should* have been nervous, he wasn't," Anakin said. "Most beings in his situation would worry about the Senate's reaction to kicking two Jedi off the ship. After all, they had no evidence we were involved in the text-doc theft. Uni looked worried. But that seemed the least of Vox's concerns."

"Very good, Padawan," Obi-Wan congratulated him. "I could not ask for a more perceptive reading of the situation."

Anakin gave him a sidelong look. "If I am so perceptive, why don't you trust me?"

Surprised at the blunt question, Obi-Wan sat opposite from Anakin. Memory flooded back. Qui-Gon had kept things from him, too. Now Obi-Wan understood his Master's caution. But he also remembered how Qui-Gon's decision to share his past had deepened their connection. It was what he wanted for himself and Anakin.

It was time to tell his Padawan about Bruck.

He took his time, explaining the Temple sabotage, his history with Bruck, and the agony of seeing a boy he'd known die. He explained the hearing but did not tell Anakin of the guilt he felt. Anakin did not have to know every detail.

Anakin shook his head in disbelief when Obi-Wan had finished. "How could they suspect you?"

Obi-Wan's gaze grew cloudy. "Bruck and I had never gotten along. After his death I wondered if I had been the best Jedi I could have been. Instead of meeting his anger with my own, could I have absorbed it without complaint? Could I have tried to understand the source of it? Would that have changed the course of Bruck's life?"

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Obi-Wan's gaze cleared, and he looked at Anakin with his usual keenness. "You see why the Jedi Masters at the Temple often speak to you of anger and fear, Anakin. They have seen what it can do. So have I."

"I have, too," Anakin volunteered. "I was a slave, remember, and the son of a slave? I was not brought up in the Temple surrounded by fountains and peace and gentleness. I think I know better than anyone what fear and anger can do." Anakin's voice was suddenly harsh.

Obi-Wan paused, letting the tone remain in the air between them. "I have not forgotten that, Anakin," he said quietly. "Nor should you. It is part of what shapes you. But if that memory always brings you back to your anger, you must find a way to think of it differently."

A soft knock came at the door. "Are you in there?" Den called softly.

Obi-Wan quickly crossed to the door. "We've been locked in. Can you get us out?"

Den chuckled. "Does a dinko bite? Does a howl runner howl? Does a nightcrawler—"

"All right, Den," Obi-Wan said through the door. "But first we need a comlink. I have to contact the Temple."

"No problem," Den murmured. "I'll be back before you notice I'm gone. Don't go anywhere."

They heard his footsteps recede.

"Let's get back to Vox Chun," Obi-Wan said. "If we both picked up that it was odd he wasn't nervous about the Senate reaction, we should wonder why."

"I don't know," Anakin confessed.

"There are two possible answers," Obi-Wan said thoughtfully. "One, that Vox has a powerful ally in the Senate who will smooth over any difficulties for the *BioCruiser*. Or two--and this is more disturbing--that Vox is allied with an organization that is even more powerful than the Senate." Obi-Wan stood up and began to wander around the room. "The galaxy has changed. It's

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full of criminal organizations. Some of them are enormously powerful. With the Senate mired in debate, there is little they have done to control this. Even Chancellor Palpatine is powerless to stop their growth."

"If the second guess is true, do you think this powerful organization is interested in the *BioCruiser*?" Anakin asked.

"Well, it does have a large treasury," Obi-Wan mused. "But attacking a ship this large has logistical problems. They wouldn't want to destroy the ship--they'd lose the treasury. There could be another reason, something else we don't know yet."

They heard a series of beeps at the door, and it slid open. Den jumped inside quickly and the door hissed shut behind him. He tossed Obi-Wan a comlink.

"You see? I can always get you out of trouble," he beamed.

"You got us *into* trouble," Obi-Wan pointed out. "Vox and Uni figured out that someone had broken into the text-doc files."

"Kill me now!" Den said, his hand over his heart. "I did my very best. Nobody's perfect."

Obi-Wan signaled Tnani at the Temple. A moment later his voice came through. "Obi-Wan, I have been trying to signal you. Someone answered but they did not use the coded frequency."

"My comlink was confiscated," Obi-Wan explained. "What do you have?"

"The text-doc for Kern checks out on all the normal channels for deep background," Tnani said. "But a little further digging tells me that Kern is actually a fabricated identity. This being called Kern died eight years ago. Here is the odd thing--he was a Senate operative."

"A no-name," Obi-Wan said.

"Yes, that is the term. Those names are retired, but someone has resurrected this one."

"Thank you, Tnani." Obi-Wan turned to the others. "If Kern is in league with Vox, they must be planning something. And if they suspect that we are close to exposing them, that might step up their timetable."

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"Right now there is a General Meeting taking place in the great hall two levels down," Den told them. "Everyone is required to attend, except for skeleton staff. Vox's quarters are empty." He held up the small device he had used to circumvent the door's security system. "I can break in."

Anakin jumped up. "What are we waiting for?"

They met no one as they hurried to Vox's quarters. It only took Den three seconds to break into the room. Vox had plush, comfortable quarters twice the size of Uni's. Obi-Wan, Anakin, and Den searched the room and went through Vox's holofiles. They found nothing suspicious.

"Well, of course he wouldn't leave anything incriminating out in the open," Den said, his gaze roaming the room. "Let's see. Beings usually hide things according to their natures. Vox is vain, lazy--never seen him volunteer to help a soul on this ship--and frail." Den crossed to Vox's sleep-couch and lay down on it experimentally. "You see? Everything is right here, so he doesn't have to get up. Comlink, monitor, light, mirror--I told you he was vain ..." Den flipped over in order to examine the buttons on a console. "Why are there so many buttons on this thing?"

Den pressed a button, and the closet doors opened. Another, and the light over the washbasin came on. He pressed buttons and levers and dials, activating various doors and lighting controls. He pressed one button and loud music suddenly blared. Anakin covered his ears.

"Glad to see you're keeping this low profile," Obi-Wan shouted over the music as Den fell off the sleep-couch in an attempt to turn the music off.

The music ended abruptly. The silence was complete. Den remained on the floor.

"Den?"

"Well, kill me now. What's this? Another control panel." Den reached out an arm and pressed a button just below the slat of the sleep-couch, where someone lying down could easily reach it.

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The thick railing of the sleep-couch support slid out, knocking Den in the head. It revealed a secret drawer cleverly concealed in the bottom of the sleep-couch.

"Ow!" he cried, rubbing his forehead.

Obi-Wan hurried forward. "What is it?"

Den craned his neck to see into the compartment. He let out a low whistle. "Somebody's not turning over his own wealth to the ship treasury, that's for sure," he said. "Look at all this crystalline vertex. Tradable throughout the galaxy." Den held up his cupped hands, displaying the currency. "Can you imagine his face if he found all this gone?" Den made an approximation of Vox's long, thin face, then added an expression of horror.

"Put it back," Obi-Wan told him sternly.

"Joke, right?" Den asked hopefully.

"May I remind you that you're a *former* thief?" Obi-Wan pointed out.

Den sighed and let the vertex run through his fingers back into the drawer. "Let's try the next button. This time I'll keep my distance." Den jumped up on the sleep-couch for safety this time. He pressed the next button, and another concealed compartment slid out.

Obi-Wan hurried forward. "There's a holoprojector here, too. Now we're getting somewhere." Obi-Wan quickly activated the device, accessing the file directory.

"Let's see," Obi-Wan murmured. "Here's an itinerary of stops the *BioCruiser* will make over the next six months."

"That's odd," Den said. "I didn't think stops were planned in advance. We just cruise until we have a problem, then find the nearest planet. Or at least we're supposed to think so."

"Here's an evacuation plan for the ship." Obi-Wan accessed the file. "It looks pretty routine. But why would Vox be so interested in safety procedures?"

"Beats me. I was on the original committee that drafted the plan. He never came to the meetings. What's that?" Den pointed to an icon at the bottom of the plan. Obi-Wan touched it, and

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another file opened. It was titled "Broken Circle," but it was blank.

"This could be coded," Den said. "Holofiles can appear blank if you don't know the password. Not to worry, my friends. I never met a code I couldn't crack. I just need a little time." He looked over at a chrono on Vox's table. "We'd better get back. The meeting is over. But let's take this before we go." Den reached down and swept up the tiny holoprojector unit. He stuffed it inside his shirt.

"But Vox will notice that it's missing," Anakin said.

"So what?" Den grinned. "By the time he figures it out, you two will be halfway to Coruscant."

They had started toward the door when Obi-Wan noticed a light flashing on Vox's main control panel. "What's that?"

Den went forward to examine it. "There's a ship approaching the docking bay. Could it be your pickup?"

"If it is, we'd better get back to our quarters," Anakin said ... just as they heard footsteps outside the door.

Chapter Nineteen

Obi-Wan signaled them to retreat toward the closet. He would rather avoid confrontation. It was imperative that they get the holoprojector out so that Den could break the code of that file. They squeezed inside Vox's huge closet, pressed up against his many fine tunics and robes. Obi-Wan left the door open a tiny crack.

Vox entered the room. He immediately crossed to his sleep-couch. He accessed the hidden drawer with the crystalline vertex. Obi-Wan heard Den let out a muffled groan as Vox scooped it out into a drawstring pouch. Vox tucked the pouch inside his tunic. He looked around the room for a moment, his eyes taking in the comfortable quarters. Then he hurried out, the door closing behind him.

They eased out of the closet.

"If he's taking all his vertex, something's up," Den said.

"Can you get us to the docking bay to meet Garen without being seen?" Obi-Wan asked. "Another Jedi might come in handy."

"Does a nightcrawler crawl?" Den grinned.

Den knew the unused corridors of the ship, where food and supplies were moved from one area to another. He was able to

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get them to the docking bay without being seen. They lingered near the outflow pipes. Garen's sleek starship had landed, and he was checking in with the *BioCruiser's* technicians.

"If they don't know we're missing, they will soon," Obi-Wan said. "We have to get Garen's attention."

Anakin focused inward. He drew in the Force from all the elements around him. He motioned to Garen and saw the tall young man look up. His gaze roamed around the docking bay and then focused on where they were hiding.

"He knows we're here," Anakin said.

Den gazed at him, baffled. "How did you do that?" He shook his head. "Is it really too late for me to become a Jedi? I could use some of those skills. Not to mention those lightsabers."

"Yes, it's too late," Obi-Wan said, his eyes on Garen.

Garen was now talking in a friendly way with the *BioCruiser* tech worker, gesturing around the giant hangar. Obi-Wan knew that his old friend was complimenting the ship and the design. The tech worker nodded, gesturing at the space, and walked off. Garen began to casually stroll around the hangar, seeming to admire its design.

He came closer and lingered near them. "What's up?"

Obi-Wan spoke in a low voice. "Things have changed. We need you to sneak away and come with us."

"Be happy to." Garen glanced around at the tech workers. They were busy at the console, so he quickly melted back in the shadow of the outflow pipes.

Obi-Wan quickly explained the situation. "We need to investigate what Vox Chun is doing before we leave the ship," he concluded. "I have a feeling the people aboard the *BioCruiser* could be in danger."

Gravely, Garen nodded.

"I've got a place where we can hole up until I break this code," Den told them. "It's not far."

They sneaked back the way they had come. As they reached the utility corridor they had used to enter, suddenly Den sprang

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back and motioned to them to do the same. "It's Kern," he whispered. "Why is he heading to the docking bay?"

They pressed back into the shadows of the columns supporting the bay. Kern passed them, looking harried.

Garen frowned. "Who is that?"

"We think he might be in league with Vox," Obi-Wan told him. "We don't have proof yet."

Garen nodded, but his expression still seemed absentminded. "He looks...familiar."

"Come on," Den urged.

Den led them through a maze of utility corridors to the greenhouse where he raised the native flowers and vegetables of Telos. At the sight of blooming purple flowers, Obi-Wan suddenly remembered a ride on a speeder over the fields and mountains of the Telosian wilderness, so many years ago. They had fought so hard to save Telos. Yet its natural beauties had ended up destroyed. Offworld had started the process, under the name of the company UniFy. Other powerful interests had taken up where Offworld had left off. ...

Remembrance flooded Obi-Wan. "Broken Circle," he said to Den. "What happened to Offworld after it was kicked off Telos?"

"I suppose they went on to ravage the rest of the galaxy," Den said. "They reorganized under a different name, I heard. They were never allowed to operate on Telos again."

"Xanatos had a scar on his cheek," Obi-Wan said. "He made it himself by pressing his father's molten ring against his skin. The ring had been broken by Qui-Gon's lightsaber. It was a broken circle."

"Do you think Broken Circle is Offworld?" Garen asked.

"It makes sense," Obi-Wan said. "Vox was secretly in league with Xanatos and Offworld. What if he never broke those ties? And Offworld was used to setting up other companies to conceal their involvement."

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"So Vox could have never stopped working for them!" Den said excitedly. "Let me tackle that coded file."

Quickly, Den set up the holoprojector. He used the code "Offworld," and nothing happened.

"Try UniFy," Obi-Wan suggested.

Den typed out the word. "We're in," he said in satisfaction. The others pressed forward to read the file.

"We're right," Obi-Wan said. "These are the records of a mining corporation."

Anakin's face fell. "But this is just a list of planetary operations. That doesn't help us much."

Obi-Wan exchanged a glance with Den. "Unless ..."

Den nodded grimly. He called up the file that listed the *BioCruiser's* scheduled stops.

"Each of the stops the *BioCruiser* has made has been to a planet targeted by Offworld for development," Obi-Wan noted. "Vox Chun is always in the landing party."

"And up to no good, I'm sure. Bribes or intimidation, who knows," Den said. "And look how successful he's been. *BioCruiser* shows up at a planet, and a few weeks later they allow Offworld development. It's a beautiful system. Kern is in the readout room. He triggers the need for fuel or repairs. It's not done often enough to cause suspicion. We orbit the planet, and Vox goes down to do Offworld's dirty work. No wonder his secret drawer was filled with crystalline vertex. He probably uses it for bribes."

"Do you think Uni knows?" Anakin asked.

"No way to tell," Den said. "I don't think so, though. I may not agree with Uni, but I don't think he's a crook like his father."

"I don't either," Obi-Wan agreed.

"But why was Kern heading to the docking bay now?" Den wondered. "Is he planning to leave the ship?"

Obi-Wan leaned forward again and studied the list of planets where Offworld had mining operations. "What system are we near now, Garen?" he asked.

"Tentrix," Garen answered. "It's a few hours away."

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"That must be TRX. It's the only system that's coded." Obi-Wan accessed the name, and a new file appeared. Once again, they all leaned forward to study it.

After a moment, Den let out a long breath. "Kill me now," he breathed. "I can't believe this. Let me look at those evacuation plans again."

Den activated the evacuation file. He carefully studied the blueprints for long minutes.

"This is different from the official plan," he said finally. "The official plan calls for an escalating series of emergency codes so that we don't panic anyone. We would need organization and control to offload so many beings. This plan calls for an immediate Code Five. That means the vessel is breaking up, and evacuation has to proceed immediately. And the code is instituted in the tech readout room--not the bridge."

"Kern," Anakin said.

"It's clever," Obi-Wan said. "A false Code Five will be instituted. A fake distress signal will be sent. And who will answer it?"

"Offworld ships," Garen said grimly.

"According to the Broken Circle plan, all the beings will be evacuated," Obi-Wan continued. "Offworld droids will board the vessel and remain — only they won't be helping with the rescue effort, they'll be stealing the treasury. Then Offworld will blow up the *BioCruiser*. None of Uni's followers will realize that the ship was blown up intentionally. Offworld will look heroic, and no one will know it stole the entire treasury."

"How will Offworld blow up the ship?" Anakin asked.

"It must be already set to blow," Den said, his face white. "It's already been sabotaged."

"We did find out that Kern knows his way around a starship engine," Anakin said.

"Kern!" Garen burst out. "I know where I've seen him before. His name was Tarrence Chenati. He sabotaged the Jedi starfighters twelve years ago. He disappeared without a trace."

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"And was given a new identity," Obi-Wan said. "Strange that both times Vox has been around, isn't it?"

"Do you think he was behind the sabotage of the starfighters?" Garen asked, his face grim.

"It's a big coincidence if he wasn't," Obi-Wan pointed out. "Vox wanted to discredit the Jedi and distract us--" He frowned. "That reminds me of something Qui-Gon told me when Xanatos was sabotaging the Temple. The keys to destroying something are disruption, demoralization, and distraction." He exchanged a glance with Garen. "Vox wanted to win in that hearing. He certainly managed to distract and disrupt us. I think we solved the mystery of who was behind the sabotage of your starfighters."

"Can we get back to the present?" Den asked. "Uh, I hate to remind you, but the ship might blow up."

"We must go to see Kad now," Obi-Wan said. "He needs to hear this information. Den, you try to find Kern."

"Do you think Kad will listen?" Anakin asked doubtfully. "You're his worst enemy."

"It doesn't matter," Obi-Wan said. "We have to try."

Chapter Twenty

Kad's face was pale. He was so furious he could barely form words. "How dare you accuse my father of this?"

"We have the holographic files," Obi-Wan said. "And your father has a pouch full of vertex. If you would only look ..."

Vox Chun sat impassively during the Jedi's denunciation. Now he rose and pointed a shaking finger at them. "Liars and thieves! Nothing has changed, my son."

"Are you so bent on destroying my family?" Kad asked Obi-Wan hoarsely. "Do you hate us so much?"

"It is not hate that brings me here," Obi-Wan said earnestly. "It is justice, and the safety of those you have brought aboard the *BioCruiser*. At any moment, Offworld ships will be surrounding us."

"I assume this is your pilot," Kad said, indicating Garen. "I am ordering you to leave my vessel. You have intruded on my peace for the last time. Go!" He shouted the last word, his pale face suddenly suffused with red.

Just then the announcement system on Kad's console crackled to life. "Attention, attention," a voice said. "Ships are ringing our vessel, claiming they received a distress call. We cannot trace the call. Please advise."

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Kad moved his head in increments, as though it was painful for him. At last he locked gazes with his father.

"You have done this?" he croaked.

Vox did not answer.

"Answer me!" His voice was suddenly full of strength.

Vox took a step toward his son. "You can come with me. They will take care of both of us, they promised—"

"No!" Kad covered his ears like a child for a moment, then dropped his hands. "You've betrayed me, you've betrayed my cause—"

"*Your* cause," Vox corrected angrily. "Did I have a choice in the matter? I am an old man."

"Obviously, you have made sure that your own nest is feathered," Kad said scornfully. "Didn't I give you everything you desired? The finest quarters on the ship, the ability to visit other worlds? You had a good life here. You did not need money. Is your greed so ravenous?"

"It is not money I want," Vox answered, drawing his fine cape around him. "It is power. You are right about only one thing in this philosophy of yours, my son. The galaxy is changing. Corruption is everywhere. And I will not be left behind! You have never understood that to be ruthless is to win. I have powerful friends, I always have. Yes, I would stop at nothing to get what I want. I wanted justice twelve years ago. So did you. If I arranged to sabotage a few Jedi starfighters, what of it?"

Kad straightened his shoulders and fixed his father with a steely gaze. "This ends now. I will inform the Offworld ships that the *BioCruiser* is not in danger. Then you may choose a planet, and I will transport you there. I will never see you again."

Vox appeared shaken by his son's cold tone. "I see I must agree." He strode from the room without a backward glance.

Kad turned away from the Jedi for a moment to compose himself. When he turned back, his eyes were clear.

"I had no idea," he said.

"We know that," Obi-Wan told him.

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Suddenly, the ship was rocked by an explosion. Kad was thrown to the floor. Obi-Wan and Garen planted their feet and rode out the blast. Anakin staggered.

The comlink Den had given him signaled. Obi-Wan activated it. Den's agitated voice boomed out.

"Kern has sabotaged the ship! It's breaking apart!"

Chapter Twenty-One

Obi-Wan, Anakin, and Garen raced to the docking bay. Kad tried to keep up, but lagged behind. When the Jedi reached the docking bay, they saw Den desperately trying to detain both Kern and Vox, who were attempting to access the escape pod. Kern had his blaster drawn. Den was unarmed, and had grabbed a hydrospanner for defense. The attempt was foolish and brave.

Obi-Wan reached out to the Force. He held out a hand and a pile of equipment barrels shot out from a stack and tumbled to the floor between Kern and the pod airlock doors. That should also give Den cover.

Vox grabbed at Kern's arm. "You stole the treasury! That wasn't the plan! What is Offworld going to do with me?"

Kern shook him off and tried to aim at Den. "Get away from me, old man!" He caught sight of the Jedi and turned the blaster fire toward them.

Garen and Obi-Wan deflected the fire as they ran, their lightsabers swinging and circling in a blazing trail. Frail Vox summoned up a burst of strength and dodged around the barrels toward the pod. He accessed the doors and jumped inside the pod.

Kern leaped over the barrels clumsily, keeping up a furious rain of fire at the Jedi. Obi-Wan jumped forward, accessing the

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Force to cross a great distance. He landed on the opposite side of Den. With a casual gesture, Kern turned for a split second, shot Vox, then threw him out of the pod. A wounded Vox hit the ground.

"Father!" Kad screamed. He had arrived at the landing bay and now began to rush forward.

Kern aimed his blaster at Kad as he dove backward into the pod. Anakin sprang forward to deflect fire as Obi-Wan lunged for the closing escape pod doors. He was too late. Kern jumped inside, and the escape pod blasted off. Kad raced to his father's side and fell to his knees. Garen checked Vox's vital signs and shook his head at Obi-Wan. Vox was dying.

The ship reeled from another blast. Tech workers began to rush into the landing bay, trying to ready escape ships. Kad did not notice. He gathered up his dying father in his arms.

Vox's lips were white. "Forgive me, son." Tears fell like soft rain from Kad's cheeks onto his father's uplifted face. He wiped them away from his father's face with great gentleness.

"Yes, Father," he said. "I forgive you." Vox barely managed a nod. Then, his gaze still on his son, he died.

Kad bowed his head over his father. Obi-Wan motioned to the others to step back.

"We have to get everyone off the ship," he said. "I've no doubt that if Kern really double-crossed Vox and stole the treasury, he has rigged the ship to explode."

Just then Andra burst in, running toward them at full tilt. Her eyes took in the scene of Kad cradling his father's body. Another explosion sent the ship trembling.

"What's happening?" she asked, her gaze wide and fearful.

"We must evacuate the ship," Den told her. "Kern has sabotaged it."

"We are also under attack," Andra told them. "Those ships that arrived due to a false distress call are now shooting at us. The defensive shield has been sabotaged."

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Anakin stepped forward. "We need to fight them from the air."

Obi-Wan knew his Padawan was right. He also knew that Anakin wanted to be a part of that fight. His need to protect Anakin and the knowledge of Anakin's extraordinary skills as a pilot battled inside him. Anakin kept his gaze on Obi-Wan. There was no pleading in it. It was the steady gaze of a Jedi, not a boy.

Obi-Wan turned to Andra. "Do you have a fast attack ship?"

She nodded. "We are peaceful, not stupid."

"Anakin will pilot it."

"I'll use my starship," Garen said. "Come on, Anakin."

"I'll organize the evacuation with Andra," Den said. "There's no time to lose."

Kad rose from the floor. "I'm needed on the bridge. We'll have to find the closest port."

Kad's comlink signaled, and a panicked voice boomed out. "An attack droid team has boarded the ship! They're—"

A burst of blaster fire sounded over the comlink, and the voice was cut off.

Chapter Twenty-Two

"I'll handle the droids," Obi-Wan said. He tucked his lightsaber back into his belt and took off.

He raced down the corridors of the lurching ship. While he ran, his mind clicked over the facts that he knew, searching for what didn't fit. He had learned from Qui-Gon that even in the midst of battle, he must not stop thinking.

Vox had accused Kern of stealing the treasury. If Offworld knew that Kern would steal the treasury before leaving the ship, why would they send droids to board it? The only answer was that Offworld did not know that the treasury was missing. Either Kern had double-crossed Offworld, or he had been a double agent and had never really worked for them at all.

That was a concern for another time. Obi-Wan guessed that the droids were following the original plan and heading for the tech readout controls, and then for the treasury. He hoped he was right. He raced into the tech readout room. Two tech workers lay on the floor, stunned from blaster bolts. One remaining worker had taken cover behind a console. The droids marched forward, keeping up a stream of blaster bolts from their chests and hands.

Obi-Wan was on them in a flash. His lightsaber was in constant motion. With attack droids, he did not have to worry

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about the fine points of strategy. They did not have the split-second timing of a living being. They were relentless, and their firepower was rapid and fierce.

Obi-Wan could have relied on someone to cover his flank, but he took the natural defense of the pillars and consoles of the room for cover. He used long strokes to down two droids at a time. He somersaulted through the air, too fast for a droid to track. He slashed through the head of one droid and wiped out the front control panel of another. He turned and kicked, sending one droid flying, but another had sneaked up on his flank. Blaster fire burned his arm, but he kept moving, slicing the droid in two. He was hit, but he didn't know how badly. His left arm was on fire, and useless. Obi-Wan switched his attack to ground level, bending and then using a fast combination of upward strokes to vanquish the rest of the droids.

He stopped at last. Sweat rolled down his face and soaked his tunic. The floor was littered with droids. He felt dizzy from his wound.

The tech worker who had taken shelter behind a console popped up. Obi-Wan recognized him as a Pho Ph'eahian by his four arms and matted blue fur. "You've been hit."

Obi-Wan winced as he looked at the wound. "It's not bad."

"We have a med kit here. Hang on." The tech worker hurried to bring the kit to Obi-Wan. "I have some medic training, don't worry." Using his four arms, he unwound a bandage at the same time he cleaned the wound, shook bacta on it, offered Obi-Wan a sip of water, and bandaged his arm.

"You should get to the loading bays," Obi-Wan told him when he had finished. "The ship is being evacuated."

"Where is Uni?" the worker asked.

"On the bridge. He won't leave the ship until everyone is safe. And he's hoping to get to a port to save the ship."

"Then I'll stay. He'll need someone in the readout room to monitor the equipment."

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Obi-Wan nodded at him, admiring his courage. "What is your name?"

"Rhe Pabs."

"Thank you, Rhe Pabs. I'm heading for the bridge now. I'll tell Uni that you'll remain."

Rhe Pabs nodded. The ship suddenly shook from another blast, and Obi-Wan staggered, his arm slamming against the console. He stifled a cry of surprised pain.

"You should see a real medic," Rhe Pabs said.

"And you should evacuate," Obi-Wan said. They exchanged a grin, and Obi-Wan raced out the door. The corridor was now crowded with the inhabitants of the *BioCruiser*. Some were carrying belongings, some were panicked, some were just bewildered. Over the speaker system, he could hear Andra's calm voice.

"Panic will delay us. Watch out for your neighbor. Proceed to the loading bays. We have room for all. Safety is our first concern. Help your neighbor."

Obi-Wan dashed through the crowd, heading for the bridge. When he burst in, Kad was sitting at the main controls.

"Do you know how to fly this?" Obi-Wan asked him.

"Yes." Kad's face was taut. "I sent the others to the escape liners. I will not leave the ship."

"The tech readout room is still operational. Rhe Pabs has agreed to remain."

"Good." Kad's eyes searched the skies outside the wraparound cockpit window. "Your Jedi are doing well. Two Offworld ships are down."

Obi-Wan saw Anakin's starfighter zooming in and taking aim at an Offworld battleship whose guns were blazing at the *BioCruiser*. The *BioCruiser* staggered from an explosion. Anakin dived, proton torpedoes firing. Another Offworld ship suddenly peeled off from its attack on the *BioCruiser* and swiveled its gunports toward Anakin's ship.

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"I hope your Jedi has eyes in the back of his head," Kad murmured.

Obi-Wan hoped so, too.

In many ways, Anakin felt most comfortable alone in the pilot seat of a starship. There was just him and the ship and the infinite ways he could maneuver. Although it was recognized at the Jedi Temple that he had gifts as a pilot, he did not get much of a chance to fly. That was why he was so frustrated to learn that if only he could turn back time, he could have been one of Clee Rhara's pilots in the training program.

He knew the Offworld ship was behind him. He did not have to look. But he did not take evasive action. Not yet. He knew the ship would wait until he was out of range of the attacking Offworld ship. They would not want the wreckage of Anakin's ship to spiral into its neighbor.

At the very last second, he pushed the ship, screaming, to the right, then climbed straight up, flipped over, and came upside down toward the ship at his rear.

"Didn't expect that, did you?" he shouted as he fired his proton torpedoes. The Offworld ship disintegrated into a shower of fire and light. Anakin felt his blood rise with the sight. He knew he should not feel triumph, but he did. He was outgunned by the power of the Offworld ships, but he would never be outmaneuvered.

Garen's voice came over the comm unit. "Two ships heading for the escape liners. I'll take the one on the left."

"Copy that." Anakin dived. The controls felt warm in his hands, even though he knew they weren't. A ship felt alive to him, an organic creature he controlled. He had felt that way since the first day he'd put his hands on the controls of an airship, back when he was a young slave boy with a cantankerous Podracer on Tatooine.

He saw Garen ahead now in his sight line. Garen swung to his left, and Anakin swung farther to the right. Four Offworld ships

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were bearing down on the escape liners. He could clearly see the Broken Circle logo on their wings.

Anakin reached out to the Force. He felt at one with the engines. The will of the ship was entwined with his. He even felt entwined with Garen.

The two pushed their engines to the maximum. They zigzagged their way toward the larger ships. The ships saw them coming and turned their barrage of firepower on the two agile starfighters.

"Time to climb," Anakin muttered, easing the controls. The ship zoomed upward and he reversed direction, avoiding a blast to his starboard engine. He somersaulted and came at one ship from a sideways angle, blasting his torpedoes. He peppered the wing with fire, and then he got lucky. One of the blasts hit the fuel tank. The ship went up in a *whoosh*, sending shock waves toward him. His starfighter danced on the vibrations.

"Good show!" Garen called through the comm unit. "Let's get number two in a pincer movement."

"Copy that. Ready or not ..." Anakin dived to the left while Garen dived to the right. Torpedoes blasting, they caught the second ship between them. The ship spiraled out, its engines dead.

Anakin was already heading for the third ship. While he'd been engaged, the third ship had managed to damage the wing of the rescue liner. Anakin came at the Offworld ship from above, dropping at top speed as though he would crash into the bridge. At this angle, the ship's guns could not reach him. It swerved, and he followed. When he had a clear shot, he went for the left engine. Torpedoes blasted, and the engine blew. Limping, the Offworld attack ship headed back to the Offworld cruiser.

Garen had taken care of the last ship. Anakin looked around. The sky was empty of Offworld ships.

"I just spoke to Obi-Wan," Garen said. "He and Kad are staying aboard the *BioCruiser*. Kad wants to make it to Tentrrix. The guidance system blew. They need us to escort them."

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Anakin could tell by Garen's terse wording that the ship was in deep trouble. He could see it: The ship was listing to one side, and great plumes of smoke were rising from the engines. The *BioCruiser* was a death trap. The last thing Anakin wanted to do was stay out here while his Master was marooned on a failing vessel. He wanted to be by his Master's side.

But he was a Jedi. He was learning that it meant doing things opposite to his nature. He turned the ship to the right and followed Garen.

"I'm getting a reading that the secondary power cell system is going," Rhe Pabs said. His voice was calm, but Obi-Wan and Kad exchanged a glance. If the secondary power cell system went, the ship would go into catastrophic failure. They would not have time to get to an escape pod.

"Rhe Pabs, it's time for you to go," Kad said, his voice even.

"No sir, I think I'll stick it out here."

Kad gave a sigh of exasperation. "All right, then. Keep us posted." He turned to Obi-Wan. "I'm going to gamble. I could use less power, which might spare the system. But we'd just have to keep the ship operational a longer period of time. Other systems are failing, too. I'm going to increase power so we can reach Tentrix faster."

Obi-Wan nodded. "All right."

Kad turned back to the controls. "This is a good time for you to evacuate."

"I'm staying," Obi-Wan said.

"This is not your fight."

"It is now," Obi-Wan responded.

It was an agonizing journey. The ship controls were erratic. Warning lights flashed on almost every panel.

Obi-Wan kept his eyes on the ships flanking them. They were so close that he could see Anakin's tense expression, the strain on his face as he tried to smile and give Obi-Wan a thumbs-up.

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"Why do you want to save the *BioCruiser* so badly?" Obi-Wan asked Kad.

"Because I invited all those beings to join me," he said grimly. "They left their homes. They have lost their treasury. This is the only thing they have left. I will not lose it."

Garen's voice crackled over the comm unit. "Tentrix dead ahead. Orbiting docking platform will be in position in eight minutes."

"We'll make it," Kad muttered.

Now Obi-Wan could see the vast planet of Tentrix. The docking platform was a small dot in the distance, just a bit larger than a star. As they came closer and the docking platform orbited toward them, it grew larger and larger.

"Almost there," Kad breathed.

Suddenly the comm unit came to life, and Rhe Pubs's agitated voice sputtered out a warning. "Attack droids still on board! I saw them heading for the bridge!"

Obi-Wan whirled around, his lightsaber drawn, just as the doors to the bridge slid open. A squad of battle droids entered, blasters firing. Blaster fire pinged off the console and thudded into the upholstery of the command benches. Obi-Wan leaped over the console as two droids took aim at Kad. He deflected the fire with his lightsaber at the same time that he sailed toward the droids. He slashed at one droid's control panel while he kicked out at the other. They both fell with a clatter. He whirled around and sliced the next in two. Diverting blaster fire, he advanced steadily until the droids were cornered, then with one stroke, cut both of them off at the knees. They sank to the floor, still firing, and he sliced off their heads. They rolled together with a clunk and were still.

"Beginning docking procedures," Kad said, his voice shaky. He threw Obi-Wan a grateful look. "We'll make it. Thanks to you."

Chapter Twenty-Three

The sun rose late on Tentrix. After their morning meal, Obi-Wan and Anakin went out on the main docking platform to watch the sun splash the deck with orange and touch the planet below with light. Anakin felt exhilarated. It was a good feeling to be halfway across the galaxy from Coruscant and the Temple, looking down at an unfamiliar planet after a successful mission. For the first time, he felt like a true Jedi.

"I don't care what Yoda says," Anakin remarked. "I think discovering sabotage, helping an evacuation, and guiding a crippled ship to safety counts as a mission."

Obi-Wan smiled. "It *was* a mission, Anakin."

"Good," Anakin said with satisfaction. "There are some things I don't understand about it, though."

"That is usually the case after a mission."

"How could Kad forgive his father at the end?" Anakin burst out. "He had betrayed him. He could have been responsible for countless deaths."

"Yes, he did many bad things," Obi-Wan agreed. "But he asked his son for forgiveness when he was dying. There must have been good in him. I think it is a mark of Kad's character that he was able to forgive his father."

Anakin shook his head. "I still don't understand it."

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"Would you forgive Yoda if he did something terrible?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Yoda would never do something terrible," Anakin said firmly.

"No, I don't think he would," Obi-Wan said. "But you must remember always, Anakin, the strength of the dark side."

Anakin's mouth set in a thin line. He still did not understand. He decided to change the subject. "I just wish we'd been able to track Kern."

"Perhaps Garen will be able to." Garen had volunteered to search for the escape pod. They continued to have hope that the *BioCruiser* treasury could be returned.

"I don't understand what Kern was doing," Anakin said. "Was he working for Offworld or not?"

"I doubt it," Obi-Wan said. "I think he is working for a different gang. Or maybe Vox contacted him on Offworld's behalf and he decided to work for himself instead. That treasury was a great temptation. And Kad told me that Kern stole the blueprints of the *BioCruiser*. He has detailed plans of all their technological innovations."

"What do you think he wants with them?"

"He will sell them," Obi-Wan said. "A constantly traveling ship with a large population could be seen as a threat by an organization that seeks control of the galaxy. Whatever or whoever is guiding Kern was interested in destroying Kad's movements as well as stealing the treasury. If we can find Kern, maybe we can get some answers."

"You sound as though you don't think Garen will find him," Anakin guessed.

Obi-Wan looked out at the stars, which were beginning to fade due to the rising sun. "There are many places to hide in the galaxy. And Kern is used to deception. But it is a good ending for your first mission, Anakin. Sometimes evil beings escape. We do what we can."

"But I always want to win," Anakin said.

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Obi-Wan frowned. "Missions are not about winning and losing. They are about leaving good behind."

They heard footsteps behind them. Kad came toward them.

"A beautiful world, Tentrix," he said, looking down at the blue planet.

"Will you stay here for a while?" Obi-Wan asked.

"The repairs will take some time, I'm afraid," Kad answered. "We are holding meetings to decide on our next step. It is not clear what that will be. I am reluctant to make the decision. Some talk of colonizing a new world or finding a planet in the Outer Rim that would welcome us. We shall see. I have led all these beings away from what they knew, but I cannot provide them with a future."

"I'm sure the path will become clear," Obi-Wan said.

Kad nodded. "I want you to know that if I am uncertain about the future, I have at least buried my past. I hope it is buried for you, too. You saved my life, but that is not why I can bury it. I know now that you didn't cause my brother's death. Bitterness was at our family's core. I know now that Bruck had it. My father had it. And the hardest thing I had to acknowledge is that I have it, too. I have based a system on rejection. I turned my face away from life. What else causes that other than a bitter heart? Funny how facing that has brought me peace at last."

Anakin watched carefully. His Master and Kad locked eyes. Something passed between them. He felt something ease in his Master, some heaviness lift from him.

"Then life has given you a gift," Obi-Wan said. "You get to begin again."

"I hear you have arranged transport back to Coruscant," Kad said. "Will you come and say good-bye to Andra and Den? They're waiting for you."

"Of course," Obi-Wan said. "Anakin?"

"I'll be right behind you," Anakin said. He did not want to leave the loading platform just yet. His mind still teemed with questions and lessons. He longed to ask Obi-Wan, but he didn't

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think he would. Whatever was in Obi-Wan's past was a wound that went deep. He understood that. He had his own wounds. Maybe someday he would stand as a man, just like Obi-Wan, and feel the burden lift.

He thought again of Kad, cradling his father as he died, tears falling from his eyes. There were levels to compassion he still did not understand. How did a being go about transforming anger into mercy? Frustration bit inside him. Obi-Wan tried to understand him. He loved his Master for that. But no one could understand. Not his fellow students at the Temple, not his teachers, not even Yoda, who seemed to understand so much. Would he always feel apart from the others because of his background? And would that feeling of separation mean that he would never become as great a Knight as Qui-Gon or Obi-Wan? It was his greatest fear.

Anakin turned back toward the shelter of the spaceport, toward friends, warmth, light, and his Master. The future would come, he told himself.

At that moment, all he felt was grateful that he had Obi-Wan to show him the way.

Book Eleven
The Deadly Hunter

Chapter One

Obi-Wan Kenobi slung his survival pack over his shoulder and yawned. It had been a long journey.

Around him rose the many levels of Coruscant, the city that covered a planet. He was standing on a landing platform at one of the high levels of the city, surrounded by tall buildings with spires and turrets. The mists around him could be atmosphere or clouds. The sky was filled with transports, large and small, that negotiated the air lanes with skill and daring.

Obi-Wan watched as his Master, the Jedi Knight Qui-Gon Jinn, thanked the space hauler pilot who had let them hitch a ride to Coruscant. He noted the respectful way Qui-Gon bowed to the scruffy creature. His manner was gentle, yet strength was behind every word and gesture. Obi-Wan hoped that one day he would have his Master's grace and assurance with other living beings. Often he just felt awkward with the many characters they met on their journeys.

Time passes and it teaches, Qui-Gon had told him. You are fourteen. You have much to see and much to experience. Do not hurry the knowledge you seek. It takes its own time.

"Sorry I can't bring you all the way," the pilot said to the Jedi. "But there are plenty of air taxis cruising this neighborhood."

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"We are grateful for your help. I wish you a safe journey home," Qui-Gon said in his quiet way.

"Always glad to help out the Jedi," the pilot answered, giving them a cheerful wave.

Qui-Gon slung his survival pack over his shoulder and gave a satisfied look around. "It is good to be back," he said.

Obi-Wan nodded. Coruscant was where the Jedi Temple was located, and the Temple was home. It was almost time for the midday meal, and Obi-Wan had been thinking about it as the kilometers went by. He and Qui-Gon had been traveling throughout the galaxy for some time.

"Look, here comes an air taxi." Obi-Wan started forward.

"Wait, Padawan."

Obi-Wan turned. Qui-Gon hesitated and waved him back. "I have another idea. Would you mind if we made a stop first?"

Obi-Wan tried to hide his disappointment. "Whatever you wish."

Qui-Gon smiled. "It won't take long. There's someone I'd like you to meet – a friend. It's not far. We can walk there."

Qui-Gon strode to the end of the landing platform and activated a temporary crossing bridge to the next level. Here in the Senate district, the buildings were close together and the walkways were easy to navigate without relying on air transport.

Obi-Wan caught up to Qui-Gon's long stride. He waited, knowing that if Qui-Gon wanted to give him more information about this friend, he would.

"Didi Oddo runs a café near the Senate building," Qui-Gon explained. "He's an informant, of sorts. Many Jedi come to him for information. We don't pay him, but we try to watch out for him in return for his help. He knows all types on Coruscant – from Senatorial aides to gamblers to various beings who find laws a hindrance to their... operations." Qui-Gon gave a brief smile. "Everyone knows Didi's Café. I first met him when I was only a bit older than you are now."

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Obi-Wan detected fondness in Qui-Gon's tone. His tiredness lifted. It would be interesting to meet a friend of Qui-Gon's. And a café meant he might be able to have a meal.

They traveled along a pedestrian walkway past shops and restaurants, all catering to the tourists and business people who traveled to Coruscant to either tour the Senate or offer petitions there. Occasionally they would have to activate a pedestrian bridge to move from one level to another. The walkways were crowded with beings from all over the galaxy. Talk bubbled around them in Basic as well as several languages unfamiliar to Obi-Wan.

Qui-Gon stopped before a small café on a corner. It appeared shabby beside the grander restaurants next door. An attempt had been made to improve it by painting the windowsills and doorframe a cheerful shade of blue. But the fresh coats of paint only made the cracked and pitted stone walls appear more run-down than they were.

Still, Obi-Wan noticed that the restaurant next door was empty, and the dingy café was packed. He could see everyone inside, sitting at small tables crowded together, all talking, gesturing, and eating enormous plates of food.

"Do not engage with anyone," Qui-Gon instructed him. "There are all types here, and fights are common."

He started for the entrance, then stopped and turned. "Oh, and one more thing. Whatever you do, don't eat the food."

Suppressing a sigh, Obi-Wan followed Qui-Gon into the bustling café. Tables were packed so closely together they could barely squeeze through. Obi-Wan nearly knocked one customer's plate to the floor. The customer, a Togorian, grabbed at it, snarling.

"Clumsy fool!"

Obi-Wan kept walking, carefully following Qui-Gon's graceful threading through the narrow spaces. Finally, they reached an open area near the back. A long bar ran along one wall. It was crowded with customers.

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"That's enough for you there, Andoran," a cheerful voice called. "Finish your ale and get a plate of food to eat. You need food, not drink, my good friend. Pilus, do you call this a tip? You just made a fortune running spice to the Quintus system. You can do better – manys the favor I've done for you, and I have a daughter to raise. Nadarr, let me refill your tea. No, no, don't pay me, save it for your wife's care. Funny how we all get better when we can afford to pay the doctor."

Qui-Gon grinned. "That's Didi."

Obi-Wan still couldn't see anything. Then a small, round man with a melancholy face jumped onto a stool behind the bar. He reached up to grab a bottle, then turned and saw them.

"Stars and planets, it's Qui-Gon Jinn! Clear the way, friends, I have a greeting to bestow!" The mournful face creased into a smile. With surprising agility, Didi leaped onto the bar, then onto the floor.

He threw his short arms around the tall Jedi. Obi-Wan stepped back, confused. He had never seen anyone hug Qui-Gon. The Jedi was such a private man that Obi-Wan expected him to disengage himself from the embrace. Instead, he pounded Didi on the back.

"It is good to see you," Qui-Gon said.

Didi released Qui-Gon. "You rogue, you stayed away too long. But my eyes thank me as they look upon your person."

Qui-Gon gestured at the café. "There have been changes. You've dressed up the place. New paint, new decoration. It looks nicer." He cast an eye along the food bar. "And cleaner."

Cleaner? Obi-Wan thought. *You mean it looked worse than this?*

"My daughter Astri's doing." Didi shrugged his round shoulders. "She's trying to attract a better clientele. Wants me to get rid of tables, have more elbowroom. Buy new plates... do renovations. She's even taken cooking lessons! She'll either ruin me or make me a fortune; I haven't decided which. And who is this delightful young man with you?"

"This is my Padawan, Obi-Wan Kenobi," Qui-Gon said.

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Obi-Wan nodded at Didi. "I'm happy to meet you,"

"And I you." Didi's face turned serious. He touched Qui-Gon's arm. "I think fate sent you to my door, my good friend."

Qui-Gon shot him a keen glance. "Is everything all right?"

"Everything is..." Didi paused. "We can't talk here. Come into the office."

Obi-Wan followed behind as Didi slid the panel open and ushered them into a cluttered back room. Supply boxes were stacked to the ceiling, and the desk was littered with account records, folded napkins, and a food-spattered apron.

As soon as the door swung shut behind them, Didi's cheerful face crumpled. He rubbed his plump hands together and fixed Qui-Gon with a mournful gaze.

"My friend," he said, "I am afraid. Danger stalks me. I need your help."

Chapter Two

"Tell me," Qui-Gon said. "You know I will help if I can."

Didi took a deep breath. "Only two days ago, I was almost kidnapped. I was simply walking down the street when a woman wearing plastoid armor came at me from behind on a swoop. Some sort of whip wrapped around my body and I was yanked toward her. Luckily a Cavrillhu happened to be standing near. He didn't like the fact that she knocked off his visor as she passed. He gave chase with a rather large vibroblade and she had to abandon her attempt. She left him with a lashing to remember her by."

"Who was she?" Qui-Gon asked.

"A bounty hunter," Didi said in a whisper. "I asked around. Nobody can be in this sector without information getting back to me. No one knows her home planet, but she's humanoid."

Qui-Gon received this news with dismay. Didi had always managed to stay on the right side of the law – barely. Qui-Gon gave his friend a piercing look. "A bounty hunter? Why is she after you?"

"It was not me, I swear," Didi said fervently. "I may feed, let us say, some dubious creatures in the underworld, but I am no criminal. You know this, my friend. All right, all right," he said before Qui-Gon could speak, "perhaps I have once or twice

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bought my provisions on the black market. Maybe I've made a gambling bet or two. That doesn't mean I break laws."

Qui-Gon sighed. "It is against your best interest to gamble in such a way on Coruscant, Didi."

"Of course it is! How well I know that!" Didi cried, bobbing his head furiously in agreement. "But I'm convinced the bounty hunter is not after me. No doubt some government on another world has confused me for someone else. It happens, you know."

Qui-Gon saw the disbelief on Obi-Wan's face. He knew that his Padawan did not approve of Didi. He had not seen Didi's generous heart, the way he took care of the many beings who crowded his café without letting them know it. One of the lessons Obi-Wan needed to learn was to look beneath the surface. Perhaps this was one way.

"What would you like me to do, Didi?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Talk to her and tell her that there's been a mistake. Convince her that I'm innocent," Didi said earnestly.

"How would I find her?" Qui-Gon asked.

Obi-Wan shot him an incredulous look. Qui-Gon answered him with a glance that spoke as clearly as words. *Wait, Padawan.*

"I know where she is staying. An inn not far from here," Didi said rapidly. "You could go right now. For a Jedi, this is a tiny favor. It will take five minutes of your time. So easy for one as wise and strong as yourself. She cannot ignore a Jedi. You know how I love your person, Qui-Gon. I would never endanger you. Your life must be long, for I value you so."

Qui-Gon's eyes twinkled. "Ah, I see. I must live a long life for *your* sake, Didi."

"Ha! And you are so clever, too. Jedi wisdom, it catches me every time! Of course I didn't mean you should live long for me only," Didi said hurriedly. "So many depend on you. Like your Padawan here. Is that not right, Obi-Wan?"

Obi-Wan did not look pleased to be dragged into Didi's coaxing. "Excuse me, Didi," he said. "But if you're innocent of

Jude Watson

any charge, why can't you see the bounty hunter yourself? Ask her to do a retinal scan or check your identification papers. The matter can be cleared up in seconds."

"That would be a very good plan, were I not such a cowardly person," Didi told Obi-Wan earnestly. He turned back to Qui-Gon. "You see how he worships you. Just as I do. You question my love for you, and it hurts me." Didi dabbed at his dry eyes with a napkin he swooped up from a stack on the desk.

"All right, Didi," Qui-Gon said, bemused. "You can stop all this drama. I will see your bounty hunter."

Didi beamed. "She is at the Soft Landings Inn. It's in the third Senate Quadrant on Quarter Moon Street."

"We'll return shortly," Qui-Gon said. "Try not to get into any more trouble while we're gone."

"I will remain here and be very good," Didi assured him.

The Jedi quickly made their way through the crowded café and reached the street.

"I don't understand," Obi-Wan burst out as soon as they were in the open air. "Why do you trust him? What if Didi actually *did* commit a crime and he's using you to get the bounty hunter off his trail? His story doesn't make sense to me. Bounty hunters can be unprincipled, but they rarely make mistakes. Why did you agree?"

"Didi might seem disreputable to you, but I've never known him to lie," Qui-Gon answered calmly. "And he's right – he knows all the criminals on Coruscant, but he's not one himself."

"Master, it is not for me to question your decision," Obi-Wan said. "But it seems to me that you are involving us in something that is bound to be dangerous and is none of the Jedi's concern. Here is a man who seeks out criminals and the dregs of the galaxy in order to get information, which he then sells to the highest bidder. If you live in that sort of world, you deserve whatever bad luck comes your way."

"Perhaps," Qui-Gon said.

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"I don't understand why you're helping him," Obi-Wan said, frustrated.

Qui-Gon hesitated. Then he said, "It's because he is my friend."

Chapter Three

"This place doesn't look as if it provides a soft landing to me," Obi-Wan observed, casting a dubious eye at the Soft Landings Inn. "More like a full-scale crash."

"I've seen many places such as this," Qui-Gon said. "It is a place for space travelers to get a few hours of sleep. It's not arranged for comfort."

The building was made from salvaged materials – durasteel sheets and conductor pipes that wrapped around the building as though they were strangling it to a last gasp. The entire structure leaned to one side. It looked as if a small push could knock it over. The stairs leading up to a battered durasteel door were lined with overflowing garbage bins.

"Well," Qui-Gon said philosophically, "we might as well get this over with."

They mounted the stairs and pressed a button to access the door. A voice came from a speaker mounted next to the frame.

"Na bti vel?"

"Visiting a guest," Qui-Gon said.

The door slid open. A small Togorian female shuffled out.

"We're looking for a woman," Qui-Gon said. "She's humanoid and wears a plastoid armor plate – "

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"Third level. Number two." The Togorian swiveled to return to her room.

"What's her name?"

The Togorian didn't turn. "Who cares? Pays in advance."

Qui-Gon lifted an eyebrow at Obi-Wan. Obviously, the Soft Landings Inn didn't worry about security.

They hurried up the creaking stairs to the third level. Qui-Gon knocked on the door marked 2. There was no answer.

"I am Qui-Gon Jinn, a Jedi Knight," Qui-Gon called through the door. "We mean you no harm. We just wish to ask you some questions. I respectfully request permission to enter."

Again, there was no answer. But after a moment, the door slowly slid open. Obi-Wan sensed a slither of movement near the floor, but no other disturbance. The door seemed to have opened on its own. It was dark inside the room, and he could not see anyone. He felt danger shimmer out at him like cracks in broken transparisteel.

Qui-Gon must have felt the warning as well. Yet he walked boldly into the room without drawing his lightsaber. Obi-Wan did the same.

Qui-Gon headed directly to a window. He tilted the shade and pale yellow light filtered in.

The bounty hunter sat facing them on a stool, her back against the wall. Her shaved head picked up the light and gleamed like a pale moon. Her dark eyes studied her visitors without interest. Underneath the plastoid chest plate and thigh-high boots, her body was powerful and strong. When she stood, she would be close to Qui-Gon's height.

"We come on behalf of Didi Oddo," Qui-Gon said politely. "You are trying to capture him, yet he has done no wrong. He requests that you check your information or contact the government or party that has sent you. He is sure that you have located the wrong person. Will you do this?"

The bounty hunter said nothing. Her eyes stayed on Qui-Gon, but they were expressionless.

Jude Watson

"Didi Oddo runs a café," Qui-Gon said. "He is not a criminal. He rarely leaves Coruscant." Silence.

"If you would allow me to check the warrant, I could clear this up immediately," Qui-Gon said. "Then we could be on our way."

More silence. Obi-Wan forced himself to remain still. He knew better than to fidget. This was a contest of wills. Qui-Gon stood easily, the same polite expression on his face. He would not show the bounty hunter that she had intimidated him with her silence. No one intimidated Qui-Gon.

"I'm afraid I must insist," Qui-Gon said, his voice hardening a fraction. "If a wrong has occurred, we should check it immediately. You would want the same."

Again, the bounty hunter did not reply. She appeared bored by her visitors. Or maybe she slept with her eyes open...

The movement came out of nowhere, taking him by surprise. He had been watching her face in order to determine what she would do. She barely moved a muscle, but with a casual flick of her fingers a whip arched into the air, its spiked tip heading straight for his face.

Obi-Wan backed up, but the whip curled around his neck several times. It tightened as he clawed at it.

Qui-Gon's extraordinarily fast reflexes were sharper than Padawan's. His lightsaber activated in a blur of light. He sprang forward to slash at the whip in order to sever it.

But the bounty hunter's agile fingers flicked again, and the whip reversed its twist and uncoiled off Obi-Wan's neck. It was just out of the lightsaber's reach, taunting Qui-Gon's blade.

The bounty hunter sprang to her feet. The whip flashed again, this time wrapping around Obi-Wan's ankles as he stepped forward to attack.

Obi-Wan stumbled and had to break his fall with one hand. Heat blazed in his face. He hated being clumsy. This was the second time the bounty hunter had surprised him. Fury clouded

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his vision for a moment, and he had trouble focusing on the calmness he would need for the battle.

The whip retracted. Suddenly, it glowed red in the dim room. It had been turned to laser mode.

Qui-Gon's lightsaber tangled with the whip. Smoke rose as the two lasers buzzed. Even while entangled with the lightsaber, the bounty hunter manipulated the end of the whip so that it slashed at Qui-Gon's forearm. Qui-Gon was forced to retreat and come at his opponent from another direction.

Obi-Wan leaped forward to help him, already flexing so that he could come at her with a reverse backhand sweep. She flipped backward three times to avoid him, then dropped unexpectedly to the floor and rolled in a ball back to the window. Her movements were liquid, as though she were boneless. Obi-Wan had never seen such acrobatic skill.

The window was open a few centimeters at the bottom. To Obi-Wan's astonishment, the bounty hunter shed her armor and flattened herself enough to slip through the small opening like water, pulling the armor behind her. In another moment, she was gone.

Qui-Gon deactivated his lightsaber. He stood staring after the bounty hunter. "A formidable opponent."

"How did she do that?" Obi-Wan asked.

"At least now we know where she is from," Qui-Gon said, shutting down his lightsaber. "The planet Sorrus. Sorrusians have a skeletal system that can compress, allowing them to squeeze through tight places. She is remarkably flexible. Not to mention very good with a whip."

Obi-Wan touched his neck. "She certainly knows how to use it."

"I've never seen that weapon before," Qui-Gon mused. "It has two modes, one a laser. She was remarkably fast, Padawan. Don't question yourself. Your reflexes will get faster as you gain more control of the Force."

Jude Watson

"You were already moving when I was strangling," Obi-Wan said ruefully.

"I was expecting the whip," Qui-Gon said. "Didi told us about it. I was watching her wrist. Next time, you will be as well."

Qui-Gon twisted around to look at his shoulder. Obi-Wan saw that his tunic was tattered. Blood soaked the edges. "You're hurt!"

"The spikes caught me. A little bacta and I'll be fine. Come, Padawan. We'd better get back to Didi with the bad news." Qui-Gon grimaced as he peeled back the cloth from the wound. "I don't think this bounty hunter is going away."

Chapter Four

"She injured your person!" Didi cried as soon as he saw Qui-Gon. "I cannot believe such a thing!" His hands flew to his mouth. "That means she is truly dangerous. Oh, I am in more trouble than I thought!"

"Never mind your troubles for the moment. We need water so we can clean the wound," Obi-Wan said sharply to Didi.

"Of course, of course, let me help. I have a med kit here somewhere.. " Didi began to fuss around the desk, pushing aside datasheets, receipts, tins, and boxes.

"Never mind. Obi-Wan, it is okay to leave me. Go get your medpac," Qui-Gon said.

Quickly, Obi-Wan found his medpac. Didi brought a basin of water. Obi-Wan moved forward but Didi waved him away.

Obi-Wan watched as Didi cut away the tunic and carefully cleaned the wound, making sure no dirt or fabric remained in the torn flesh. His plump fingers were surprisingly delicate. He worked quickly and expertly, with no trace of hesitation. Obi-Wan couldn't help but admire his skill. He would have expected the excitable Didi to feel faint, or moan with sickness at the sight of blood.

Didi dripped bacta into the wound and then with great gentleness wrapped a clean bandage around it.

Jude Watson

"Thank you," Qui-Gon said. "I could not ask for better care."

"You'll need a fresh tunic," Obi-Wan said. "I can fetch one –" Didi began.

"In a moment." Qui-Gon frowned at Didi. "This bounty hunter is not giving up. Either she is very stubborn, or there truly is a warrant out for your arrest."

"Impossible," Didi said, shaking his head.

"Or there could be no warrant at all, just someone who wants to do Didi harm," Obi-Wan pointed out. "Bounty hunters often take private commissions."

Didi swiveled and stared at Obi-Wan, his mouth open. "Oh, do not say that, Obi-Wan. That is even worse. It would mean that someone has placed a death mark on my head."

Obi-Wan was taken aback at the sight of Didi's pale face. "I didn't mean to scare you."

"I appreciate that very much, dear boy," Didi said. "Very kind of you. But you did. Why would someone do such a thing? I have no enemies. Only friends."

"Obi-Wan, you make a good point," Qui-Gon said thoughtfully. "We should have considered this before. It is logical, considering the bounty hunter's attitude and how Didi makes his living."

"Serving food and drink?" Didi asked, baffled. "I admit some have gotten sick after supper, but I've never actually poisoned anyone. At least, not on purpose."

"I am not talking about your dubious cooking skills," Qui-Gon said to Didi. "I'm talking about your sideline. You traffic in information. Information that could benefit or harm criminals as well as security forces and members of the Senate. What if you know something that someone doesn't want to get out?"

"But what could it be?" Didi asked. "I don't know *anything*."

"You must," Qui-Gon insisted. "You just don't know what it is."

"How can I know something without knowing it?" Didi cried in frustration. "Is this worth a death sentence, I ask you? I hear

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something and pass it along for a tiny profit, and suddenly I am dead? Is that fair?"

Didi would have gone on, but Qui-Gon silenced him with an impatient gesture. "Let me see if we can narrow this down. If we knew who hired the bounty hunter, we could begin to investigate. Let me contact Tahl."

Didi slumped in a chair. Obi-Wan drew closer to Qui-Gon. "You're going to involve the Temple resources?" he asked in a low tone.

"Tahl is a friend of Didi's, too," Qui-Gon said, activating his comlink. "She'll want to help."

Seconds later, Obi-Wan heard Tahl's crisp voice over the comlink. After Qui-Gon filled her in on the situation, she said, "Didi is in trouble? Of course I want to help."

"I know the bounty hunter is Sorrusian," Qui-Gon said. "She didn't speak. She's about my size, and very muscular. She wears plastoid armor and has a shaved head."

"I know of her," Tahl said. "I don't know her name. Nobody does. We've received reports that are somewhat alarming, so Yoda asked me to keep track of her movements. It's hard because she tends to disappear into thin air. I didn't know she was on Coruscant. She doesn't work for governments, just private individuals with great wealth. She gained her reputation with a series of for-hire killings. Some of her victims have been in high-level government or finance."

"In other words," Qui-Gon said grimly, "she is able to get around high-level security."

"Exactly. And word is that she will take any assignment if the price is right. She's very good, Qui-Gon. Very dangerous."

A moan came from the desk.

Tahl's warm laugh came through the comlink. "I hear you, Didi. Do not fret. With Qui-Gon helping you, everything will turn out fine. Qui-Gon, I will see you and Obi-Wan soon, I'm sure. Yoda is expecting you shortly."

Jude Watson

Tahl's voice was warm as she spoke to Didi. Obi-Wan didn't understand. Obviously, he missed whatever charms Didi had for the other Jedi.

Qui-Gon cut the communication. "The situation is getting interesting," he observed.

"I would hardly use that word," Didi said mournfully. "Terrifying, maybe. Horrible. Unfair. Hopeless –"

"The question is," Qui-Gon interrupted, ignoring Didi, "why would such a high-priced killer be hired to take care of a low-level scrounger like Didi?"

Didi sat erect. "Low-level? Just a minute. I resent that characterization. Haven't you noticed that we painted the windowsills? And as for scrounging –"

"Didi, focus your mind," Qui-Gon interrupted urgently. "Think!"

"Hardly my best ability," Didi said. "But I'll try. Information has dried up recently. And I've been busy with the café. Astri doesn't like my...sideline, so I have to be careful now. However, there are a couple of pieces that came my way recently by way of a regular informant, Fligh. But neither of them seems at all important. I wasn't even sure who to sell them to..."

"What are they?" Qui-Gon asked impatiently.

Didi held up one fat finger. "First, Senator Uta S'orn from the planet Belasco is resigning." He held up a second. "And the Tech Raiders are moving their headquarters to Vandor-3."

Obi-Wan looked at Qui-Gon. "Tech Raiders?"

"Black market traders in space vessels and weapons,"

Qui-Gon explained.

"But why would the gang care if I knew their new location?" Didi asked. "They know I wouldn't sell it to the security forces. I myself have used the gang to find parts for my pocket cruiser." At Qui-Gon's raised eyebrow, he quickly added, "Well, they are cheaper! It's not illegal. Technically."

"Even if the parts are stolen?" Qui-Gon asked.

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"I don't know if they're stolen!" Didi insisted. "Why should I ask? I know *I* didn't steal them."

"What about Senator S'orn?" Qui-Gon asked.

Didi shrugged. "She's not on any important committees or planning a war or anything. It's a piece of gossip, nothing more. I'm planning to call on a few journalists. One will probably pay a few credits. I'll have to hurry to beat Fligh. He's been known to sell information more than once. I assure you, this is all routine news. Nothing worth killing anyone over. Especially me."

"We don't know that for sure," Qui-Gon said thoughtfully. "We'll have to investigate both items."

Why us? Obi-Wan thought. They had done one favor for Didi. Did Qui-Gon mean to involve them further?

The door opened and a slender female rushed into the room. She wore a utility cap that was tugged low over her forehead. Curly dark hair poked out of it, waving around her ears and neck. She wore a floor-length apron that was snowy white except for one brilliant splotch of red. As she walked, she left floury footprints. She held a pan full of soup that was the obvious source of the apron stain.

She thrust a spoon at Obi-Wan. "Taste this, will you?"

Obi-Wan glanced at Qui-Gon, mindful of his directive not to eat the food.

"Don't be shy. Here." She pushed the spoon toward him.

Obi-Wan had no choice. Tentatively, he spooned up the soup and swallowed. A smooth, tangy liquid slid down his throat.

"It's good," he said, surprised.

"Really?" Didi and the young woman said together, also surprised.

"Really," Obi-Wan told her.

She turned and saw Qui-Gon. "Qui-Gon! Didi said you were here. How good it is to see you." She placed the pot on the desk, spilling a little over the top. She took the edge of her apron and wiped the spill, knocking a shower of durasheets onto the floor. "Oops."

Jude Watson

Didi shot Qui-Gon a warning look that she did not catch.

"Just a friendly visit," Qui-Gon answered. "You're right, Astri. It's been too long since I visited your father."

"Have you seen the improvements?" Astri asked. "I painted everything myself. It was hard to persuade my father to spruce up the place."

"I don't want to scare the regular customers away," Didi said.

"If only we could," Astri groaned.

"I don't know what was wrong with my cooking," Didi went on. "Nobody ever complained."

"Sure," Astri said cheerfully. "They were too busy being sick. Meanwhile, I've decided we must spend money on new napkins, and cloths for the tables –"

"Who needs a cloth? It just gets dirty!"

Astri turned to Qui-Gon and spread her hands. "Do you see my problem? I want to make the place better, and all he does is complain. He welcomes back the dregs of the galaxy. He promised to give up buying and selling information, but he can't resist feeding them. How can I attract a better class of customer when the place is full of gangsters?"

"Everyone likes to eat with gangsters," Didi observed. "It adds spice to the food."

"I'll add the spice, thank you very much," Astri said crisply. "I've landed a big client, Father. This could be our big break. There's a medical conference coming to the Senate, and scientists are arriving from all over the galaxy. Guess who booked the café for a small dinner?"

"The Chancellor?" Didi guessed.

"Not yet," Astri said with a grin. "Jenna Zan Arbor!"

Obi-Wan had heard of Jenna Zan Arbor. Years ago, as a young scientist, she had achieved fame by inventing a vaccine for a world threatened by a deadly space virus. She focused her attention on helping planets with low levels of technology. Her last project was to triple the food supply on the famine-stricken planet of Melasaton.

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"Who?" Didi asked.

"Jenna Zan Arbor!" Astri cried. "She reserved the entire café for her party!"

"Did you say elegant?" Didi asked. "Now *that* sounds expensive."

"Just... don't... ruin it," Astri said through her teeth. Then she picked up the soup and left the room, curls bouncing, apron swinging, and soup dribbling onto the floor.

"Isn't she marvelous?" Didi sighed. "But she is driving me into bankruptcy."

"You promised her not to buy and sell information anymore," Qui-Gon said.

"Well, I suppose I did, yes. But can I help it if this one or that one whispers something to me in exchange for a few credits or a meal?"

"Maybe Didi should go away for awhile," Obi-Wan suggested. "Some other planet where the bounty hunter won't find him."

"Now that's an ideal!" Didi said cheerfully. "Running away is just my style!" Then he frowned. "But I don't like to leave Astri."

"Of course not," Qui-Gon agreed.

"She will spend all my money," Didi said. Qui-Gon sighed. "I don't think you should run away, Didi. The bounty hunter is undoubtedly an expert tracker. And it is better that we face the problem here and now. Obi-Wan and I will do some investigating for you."

"But we're due back at the Temple!" Obi-Wan protested. "Tahl said Yoda was expecting us."

"We can spare a few hours," Qui-Gon said. "I'll contact Yoda on the way and tell him why we are delaying our return. He'll understand. He's a –"

"– friend of Didi's," Obi-Wan supplied.

Qui-Gon's eyes twinkled. "Besides, it will give you a chance to see the seamier side of Coruscant."

"Just what I always wanted," Obi-Wan grumbled.

Jude Watson

"And when you return, I'll treat you to a delicious meal!" Didi announced.

Obi-Wan looked doubtful. "As long as you're not the one to cook it," he said.

Chapter Five

Armed with a good description of Fligh, the informant, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan headed to the Senate. "Just ask around," Didi had told them. "Everyone knows Fligh."

They walked through the main entrance of the Senate rotunda. The press of beings inside worked against the calm surroundings to create a sense of controlled chaos. Obi-Wan was jostled and bumped by quick-moving Senatorial aides and consorts of various species. Hover-cams buzzed overhead, heading to the vast interior amphitheater to record the proceedings. Guards dressed in royal blue robes strode by purposefully.

Small cafés were tucked into overhangs along the exterior wall, some more populated than others. Qui-Gon stopped to inquire at several of them, and then moved on.

"Didi is right," he told Obi-Wan. "Everyone knows Fligh. They just don't know where he is."

At last they found him in one of the small pocket cafés. This one was deserted. It was past time for midday meal, and the Senate was in session.

Fligh sat at a small table, nursing a glass of muja juice. He was a spindly creature with a long face, prominent ears, and one green prosthetic eye.

Jude Watson

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan sat at the table. "Didi sent us," Qui-Gon said.

Fligh looked surprised. Then he licked his lips. "Didn't know Jedi trafficked in information. Buy, sell, or trade?"

"We are not here to make a deal," Qui-Gon said. "We need you to tell us how you found out about the two pieces of information you just sold to Didi."

Fligh wrapped his long, thin fingers around his glass and looked at them slyly. "Why should I tell you? What's in it for me, I ask?"

"You would be helping Didi," Qui-Gon said. "He is in trouble. And if you chose not to help him, I would not be pleased." Qui-Gon gave Fligh a level stare.

Fligh choked on his muja juice, then broke out into nervous laughter. "You are a friend of Didi! I am a friend of Didi! We are all friends! There you go! Of course I want you to be pleased. I'll tell you everything you wish to know. May I say that I am both helpful and discreet? And generous. May I offer you two some muja juice? Unfortunately at the moment I am out of credits, but I would be happy to order them for you."

Qui-Gon shook his head. "Just tell us what we want to know, Fligh. How did you find out about the Tech Raiders?"

Fligh shrugged. "Easy. One hears things if one pays attention. And there you go."

"You just heard it in the air?" Qui-Gon asked.

"I can see you're a stickler for details," Fligh said, leaning back and chuckling at Qui-Gon. "Okay, okay. I heard it from their representative on Coruscant. Helb is the broker for stolen tech equipment. One meets him in the Splendor Tavern, he makes the deal. He used to make deals at Didi's, but the lovely Astri took care of that. Too bad – Didi always gave me juice for free." Fligh sighed at the lost opportunity.

"What about your information about Senator S'orn?" Qui-Gon asked.

"One has to protect one's sources, you know," Fligh stalled.

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Qui-Gon gave him a stern look. It was all he had to do. The cowardly Fligh immediately backtracked.

"Okay, okay, I can see you'll make me talk. I got hold of a confidential memo written by S'orn herself announcing her resignation. It isn't scheduled to be released until next week. Naturally one could not let such a find go to waste."

"And how did you get this memo?" Qui-Gon asked.

"How does one learn things? Things happen. A durasheet falls into the trash bin, someone plucks it out, passes it along..." Fligh shrugged. "It's the way one has to work. A little here, a little there. A favor here, a trade there, and there you go." He turned to Obi-Wan. "Do you like my eye?"

The abrupt question took Obi-Wan by surprise. "Which one?" he asked politely.

"The green one, of course!" Fligh said, pointing to it. "I lost my own in a little dustup with some Hutts. Isn't it a beauty?"

"It's very attractive," Obi-Wan said.

"Very nice," Qui-Gon offered, when Fligh turned to him.

"You see? There you go – a trade. A little information goes here, a little goes there, and I get an eye! How else does one survive on Coruscant?"

"One could get a job," Qui-Gon pointed out. "One could, if one were a different being," Fligh agreed. "However, one is not." He shrugged again. "I do the best I can. On my own since I was knee-high, I learned how to get by. Didi is my friend. He has done much for me, and Astri is in my heart as well. I'm sorry Didi is in trouble. I will try to help, Jedi. This I promise."

"I think it better if you stay out of it," Qui-Gon said in a kindly tone, for Fligh's tone was sincere. "We don't know what we're dealing with yet."

"Then call on me when you need me. I will do my best, which I am sure you can guess is not much." Fligh cackled. "But there you go."

Qui-Gon stood. "We might have to return and ask you more questions."

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"I am always here," Fligh said. He waved at the empty café and his jar of muja juice. "Where else can one find such excitement?"

Since they were already in the Senate building, Qui-Gon decided that their next stop should be Senator Uta S'orn's office.

The outer room was empty, so Qui-Gon knocked on an inner door.

"Telissa?" The door was flung open. A Belascan female stood, one hand on her hip, wearing the trademark Belascan headdress of wrapped jeweled cloth, as well as an irritable expression. "Oh, sorry. I thought you were my assistant." Her glittering eyes swept them, and her expression changed. "Oh. Jedi. Excuse my rudeness."

"May we speak with you for a moment?" Qui-Gon asked.

"I am very busy... all right. Enter." Senator S'orn swiveled and walked back into her private office. She waved them to two chairs set in front of her desk.

Qui-Gon seated himself and began with preliminaries. "You are resigning next week, Senator S'orn."

She looked startled. "But how do you know this?"

"The information is out there," Qui-Gon said. "It is for sale. I do not know if anyone has bought it yet, but no doubt someone will. We cannot prevent that."

Senator S'orn dropped her head in her hands. "My data pad. It was stolen at the Senate commissary. My resignation announcement was on it.

Obi-Wan glanced at Qui-Gon. Obviously, Fligh had lied about how he'd received the information.

She raised her head. "Disaster. I'm sponsoring legislation in two days. If this gets out beforehand, I'll have no support."

"Did you see anyone nearby who could have stolen it?" Qui-Gon asked.

She shook her head. "Just the usual Senate crowd." She laced her fingers together and bowed her head for a moment in

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thought. Then she raised her head and put both hands flat on the desk. "Decision. I must announce my resignation immediately. Then I can rally supporters to the legislation by saying they must help me with my legacy. I'll play on their sympathies." She drummed her fingers on the desk as she calculated her strategy. Her mind seemed to be elsewhere as she said absently, "Thank you for telling me."

Qui-Gon stood. "Thank you for your time."

She did not say good-bye or acknowledge them again. Her mind was already working to fix her problem. Obi-Wan followed Qui-Gon out the door.

"Why didn't you ask her about Didi?" he asked Qui-Gon.

"Because it wouldn't have gotten me anywhere. If she put a death mark on Didi's head, she would hardly admit it," Qui-Gon said. "And I can't see how she could trace the theft of the data pad to Didi. Do you?"

"Only if she's lying," Obi-Wan said after a moment. "If she'd seen Fligh steal it, it would be easy to trace him to Didi. But why go after Didi, and not Fligh?"

Obi-Wan thought this over some more. He felt at a disadvantage. Qui-Gon seemed to have an insight into the hearts and minds of beings that he did not.

"Still, Senator S'orn's distress seemed sincere to me," he said slowly. "She was barely polite and not terribly nice, but not evil. Just busy."

"A typical Senator," Qui-Gon said with a half smile.

"She seemed surprised that the information was out," Obi-Wan said.

"Yes, she did," Qui-Gon mused. "Unless she is a very good actress. But she did seem sincerely upset."

"Why did Fligh tell us that an assistant got her announcement out of the trash?" Obi-Wan asked. "It's obviously not true."

"He didn't actually say that, Padawan," Qui-Gon said. "He just indicated that as one of many ways he could have gotten the

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information. No, Fligh stole the data pad. He would not want to admit that to us, however."

"This seems like a dead end to me," Obi-Wan said in conclusion. "Senator S'orn certainly doesn't look like a murderer."

Qui-Gon's blue eyes were keen. "Tell me, Padawan. What does a murderer look like?"

Chapter Six

The wide Senate doors at the south exit were crowded with beings hurrying inside and outside the building. They were all intent on getting somewhere fast, some of them barking into comlinks, others with harried, preoccupied looks on their faces.

"Now we need to find the Splendor Tavern," Obi-Wan said.

"I know where it is," Qui-Gon answered, striking off to his left down a small alley.

Obi-Wan lengthened his stride to match his Master's. "How do you know?" he asked curiously.

"Because I have had occasion to go there," Qui-Gon responded. "It's where connections are made for the black market. If one needs weapons or an illegally modified speeder, or wants to gamble, one goes to the Splendor.

Sometimes on a mission you need help from the worst sorts as well as the best."

Qui-Gon led him farther into a section he had never been in before, down many levels closer to the planet's surface. If Obi-Wan had been asked to describe Coruscant, he would have talked of a gleaming planet, all silver and white, with wide walkways and space lanes that flashed with agile crafts zooming toward their destinations. He barely knew the other Coruscant, below the levels of the Senate and the beautiful residences above. This one

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was made up of narrow alleys and cluttered streets, with dark shadows and furtive creatures who darted away when they saw the Jedi striding toward them. Games of chance were played on stoops and in outdoor caf  s. Weapons were placed on tables as warnings for cheaters.

Qui-Gon stopped in front of a metal building with a sagging roof. An old readout sign swung in front, occasionally banging against the rough metal walls with a screeching sound. Half of its letters had burned out, so it read: S P D O R. The windows were shuttered, and only a thin strip of light came through.

"Here we are," Qui-Gon said.

"Here?" Obi-Wan studied the building with a dubious eye. "It certainly doesn't live up to its name."

"Don't worry. It's worse than it looks."

Qui-Gon pushed open the door. Immediately they were met with a blast of noise. Music played from a recorder in the corner while a variety of customers drank, ate, and played games of chance at each table. A jubilee wheel whirled on the bar, and gamblers gathered around with fistfuls of credits, betting on the outcome. It stopped, and one crowed triumphantly while two others began to fight. A fourth turned away, desperation on his face.

Qui-Gon made his way to the Imbat bartender, whose head nearly bumped the ceiling, and whose long ears drooped to his shoulders. As the Jedi watched, his massive hand reached out and casually smacked a bar customer who was trying to get his attention by waving his arms. The customer fell back off his seat and crashed to the floor, a stunned look on his face. Someone stepped over him and took his place.

With a jolt, Obi-Wan realized that Didi's caf   hadn't been filled with the worst of the galaxy, as he'd thought. He did not know who owned the Splendor. But whoever it was obviously did not care one bit about his customers.

Qui-Gon took up a position at the end of the bar. He did not signal the bartender in any way, but the Imbat moved toward

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him. He bent his massive head and listened to Qui-Gon dolefully.

Then, moving only his eyes, he indicated a shadowy corner.

Qui-Gon signaled to Obi-Wan, and they moved toward it.

Helb was a Neimoidian. Instead of the large glasses of ale the other customers were swilling, a small cup of tea was almost hidden in his large, sharp-nailed hands. Though Neimoidians usually favored the richest robes they could afford, Helb wore a plain gray unisuit with two blasters strapped to his hips. His back was to the wall, and he watched the crowd with shrewd orange eyes.

Qui-Gon took a seat at the table across from him. Obi-Wan did the same.

Helb gave them a considering look. "I am surprised to see Jedi in a place such as this."

"We come for information only," Qui-Gon said.

"That is probably the one thing I do not have to sell," Helb said.

"That is all right, for I do not wish to buy it," Qui-Gon said. He sat in silence, waiting. Again, Obi-Wan marveled at how much Qui-Gon was able to convey through stillness.

Helb gave the hissing sound that passed for Neimoidian laughter. "You are lucky. I'm in a good mood. I just won a game of sabacc. Otherwise you would be talking to a wall."

Qui-Gon didn't rise to the bait. "There is a death mark on the head of Didi Oddo. He wonders if the Tech Raiders are displeased with him."

Helb laughed again. "I am the one who is displeased with Didi. He beat me at a game of sabacc the other day. That is why I am so happy to win today."

Qui-Gon nodded. Helb took a sip of tea.

"Which doesn't mean I want to kill him," Helb continued. "If I were going to put a death mark on someone's head, it would be his friend

"Why?" Qui-Gon asked.

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"Because he owes the Tech Raiders an interesting sum of money," Helb responded. "Not just gambling winnings on one game of sabacc, but favor after favor we have done him for which he has not paid. Why would I put a contract out on Didi?"

"Because if you put a death mark on Fligh, you'd never get your money," Qui-Gon said.

Helb laughed. "I'll never get it anyway!"

"Fligh knows that your group has moved to Vandor-3," Qui-Gon said. "If you kill him, the information won't get out."

Helb shook his head, bemused. "I told Fligh because I *wanted* the information to get out. I knew he wouldn't sell it to the security force.

Only to those who need tech equipment or stolen speeders for cheap. How else would we get customers? Speaking of which, if the Temple needs equipment..."

"No, thank you," Qui-Gon said. He stood.

"Don't worry about Didi," Helb said. "He always seems to land on his feet. And if you see Fligh, tell him I'm looking for him. That should scare him!" Hissing with amusement, Helb turned his attention back to his tea.

Qui-Gon started for the door. As Obi-Wan began to follow, something caught his eye. A wizened old man wrapped in layers of soiled cloaks and robes sat at a table, pushing pieces around a gameboard with a dirty finger. His eyes slowly slid back to the board as Obi-Wan glanced at him. A jolt of familiarity hit Obi-Wan, but he could not place it.

He caught up with Qui-Gon at the door. But something made him turn back. The old man was now heading toward the back of the place. He shuffled through the crowd at first, but his step quickened as he passed through the throng at the bar. It was difficult to keep him in sight through the press of bodies, but Obi-Wan focused his attention, watching for movement.

He saw a cape drop to the floor. Then another. No one noticed.

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The windows along the back were shuttered as well. One was slightly more ajar than the others, the window itself cracked to let in a tiny stream of air.

The shuffling old man had disappeared. A tall female dressed in a dark tunic suddenly disengaged from the crowd and moved toward the rear.

"It's her," Obi-Wan breathed. He quickly turned to Qui-Gon. "She's here."

Qui-Gon turned. As they watched, the female dressed in black hauled herself up and then slipped through the narrow opening of the window, her body seeming to compress as she did so.

With a leap, Qui-Gon burst out the front door. Obi-Wan followed on his heels. They raced down a narrow alleyway crowded with so many durasteel garbage bins that they had to leap up and run on top of them.

Garbage squished under their boots, impeding their progress. They landed as lightly as they could, racing over the tops of the bins toward the rear. At the end of the alleyway, they leaped down onto solid ground.

She was already disappearing around a corner far down the back alley.

Qui-Gon increased his pace, and Obi-Wan spurted forward to catch up to him. His Master was a faster runner, and he dashed around the corner before Obi-Wan could get there.

Obi-Wan pushed himself to his limit, racing after Qui-Gon. The question was, if they caught the bounty hunter, what would they do? Questioning her had not exactly been productive before.

As he rounded the corner, he saw that Qui-Gon had given up. The alley widened into a small square with six different roads radiating out from the center.

"She's gone," Qui-Gon said.

"If that was really her," Obi-Wan said. "Now I can't quite believe it. I saw an old man, and suddenly he became a younger female."

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"Your eyes did not deceive you, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said. "Only a Sorussian would have been able to slip through that opening. The question is, why was she there at all? Was it a coincidence, or is she now on our trail?"

Chapter Seven

"What are you doing here?" Astri demanded as Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan walked through the door of Didi's Café. She wiped her flour-dusted hands on a dish towel. "Oh, forgive me, I didn't mean that the way it sounded. You are always welcome, Qui-Gon. Except not just now."

"Don't worry, Astri, we haven't come for a meal," Qui-Gon told her.

"Jenna Zan Arbor is due with her party any moment," Astri said distractedly. "One of the servers hasn't shown up. I haven't finished the banja cakes yet. The water won't boil for the pashi noodles, and my sauce is too spicy!"

"It smells delicious," Obi-Wan said helpfully.

"Thank you. If only I could feed them with smells! How does the place look? Fligh was supposed to come by and sweep, and he never showed up, that rascal. After all Didi has done for him!"

"I have never seen the café look better," Qui-Gon assured her.

Astri had tried to brighten the place with ornate candles on the two long tables she had pushed together. A long pink cloth was on each table, and the plates and glasses looked clean and sparkling. But she could not hide the general air of disrepair of the place. The walls were dingy with the years of smoke and dirt,

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and the floor was pitted from the marks of thousands of boots and scuffles.

"There was no time to paint the inside," Astri said, noticing Obi-Wan's glance around. "And no time to tear the place down and rebuild, either." She gave a comical grimace.

"I'm sure everything will go fine," Qui-Gon said. "We've just come to talk to Didi for a moment. Is he here?"

"He's in the back. I told him to stay out of my way." Astri's dark eyes twinkled. "I think I scared him. He actually listened to me." Suddenly, she craned her neck and stared out the window. "Stars and planets, it's them!" Astri gave a surprisingly loud bellow. "Renzi! Our customers are here! Renzi –"

She was still bellowing as the door opened.

A tall woman dressed in a gray shimmersilk gown underneath a rich purple cloak stood uncertainly in the doorway. Her gleaming blond hair was intertwined with silky fabric. "This is Didi's Café?"

Hurriedly, Astri wiped her hands on her stained apron, then held one out for the woman to shake. She had rubbed a berry stain on her apron, and the hand she offered was blue. The woman stared at it and did not take it. Astri quickly tucked her hand behind her back.

"Yes, yes, come in. You are so welcome. I'm the owner and chef, Astri Oddo."

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan faded back. The woman's party crowded behind her. They glanced around the café, surprise on their faces. Obviously they had expected a grander restaurant for their meal. They were from various worlds, but all had a prosperous look. The men were dressed in fine tunics and jackets, the women in shimmersilk gowns or jackets. One aristocratic-looking female wore a jeweled turban. Her light blue eyes widened in dismay as she surveyed the café, and she quickly gathered her tunic closer around her.

"There must be some mistake," Jenna Zan Arbor said.

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Just then Renzii the waiter raced out of the kitchen and skidded to a stop in front of the party, still buttoning his tunic. "Welcome, come in, enter, this way," he babbled.

"I think we'd better leave Astri to her guests,"

Qui-Gon murmured to Obi-Wan. "It seems her hands are full."

They walked back toward Didi's private office. They pushed open the door. Didi sat in a chair, his back to them. He didn't turn.

"Didi? Is everything all right?" Qui-Gon asked.

Slowly, the chair swiveled around to face them. Didi's dark eyes were full of tears. "I fear it is my fault," he said.

"What is your fault, Didi?" Qui-Gon asked gently.

"It's Fligh," he said. "He's been murdered."

Chapter Eight

Obi-Wan had faced death before. He never got used to it. The way a spirit could fill a space, the life energy behind the eyes, and then... nothing.

"What happened?" Qui-Gon demanded.

"I don't know," Didi said, mopping his face with a napkin. "The Coruscant security force contacted me. They know Fligh is a friend. He was found in one of the alleyways around the Senate. The Lane of All Worlds is where he is lying like an animal." Perspiration shone on Didi's face. "Do you think this has anything to do with me?" he asked. His face betrayed how fearful he was to hear the answer.

"I'm afraid I do," Qui-Gon said grimly. "We'd better talk to the security forces. Come on, Didi."

"Me?" Didi squeaked. "Why do I have to go?" "Because I think you should remain with us at all times now," Qui-Gon said. "You aren't safe here."

"But I am!" Didi protested. "Astri will lock the front door so no other customers come. And this fancy party will go on for hours. No one will try to attack me while such distinguished guests are here. And besides," he added in a low tone, "I'm too afraid and sad to move right now. I could not look upon my dead friend's body. I am sorry."

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Qui-Gon exchanged a glance with Obi-Wan. Obi-Wan hoped he was not going to suggest that he stay here with Didi while Qui-Gon investigated Fligh's death. He did not want to stay behind to baby-sit Didi when there was work to do.

"All right," Qui-Gon said reluctantly. "This shouldn't take very long. Make sure every door and window is fastened tight, Didi. This bounty hunter can get through very small spaces."

Didi nodded vigorously. "I have done so already, but I will double-check."

"We'll return soon," Qui-Gon said. "We'll knock at the back door. I don't want to spoil Astri's big evening."

"So considerate of you, Qui-Gon," Didi said fervently. "None of us want to spoil things for Astri. I will wait here. Can you... can you make sure that Fligh is... taken care of?" Didi's eyes filled with tears. "Tell the security forces that I will pay for the funeral. I will pay for everything."

Qui-Gon put a hand on Didi's shoulder. "This is not your fault, my friend."

"I hear your words," Didi whispered. "Yet I do not feel them."

Qui-Gon checked the doors and windows from the outside before they headed off. He did not trust the scattered Astri to remember to bolt the door. But everything was locked up tight.

It was fully dark when Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan arrived at the Lane of All Worlds. There was no moon, and the glare of the glow lamps threw harsh shadows.

The Coruscant security forces in their navy uniforms milled around Fligh's fallen body, which was covered by a tarp.

"May I look?" Qui-Gon asked the officer in charge. His nameplate read CAPTAIN YUR T'AUG. He was a stocky Bothan with a flowing beard and glossy dark hair that hung to his shoulders.

The captain frowned, but all officers in the security force knew that Jedi requests must be honored.

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"All right," Captain Yur T'aug said. "Not a pleasant sight, though."

"Stay here, Padawan," Qui-Gon told Obi-Wan. This order Obi-Wan was glad to obey. He did not want to see Fligh's body. He wanted to remember Fligh alive.

He watched as Qui-Gon, his back to him, crouched to lift a corner of the tarp. Although Qui-Gon did not flinch or shudder, Obi-Wan knew the sight had distressed him. There was something about how his Master did not move for several seconds, how his hand dropped the tarp with great gentleness.

Obi-Wan turned away with a shudder. Around the body, officers went about the business of death, tagging various items, searching the ground with glow rods, entering information in their data pads, talking in groups. It could be any being lying on that cold stone walkway. Fligh had ceased to matter. Only the manner of his death was important.

Obi-Wan looked up at the dark sky. Stars glittered with edges that looked hard enough to cut. Already he felt at times that he had seen too much death and cruelty. How did Qui-Gon, who had seen so much more, feel? It was the Jedi's job to meet such things. To help. The helping was easy compared to this.

Will I ever get used to death? Obi-Wan wondered.

Obi-Wan saw something glitter in the dim shadows. He walked closer. It was a bright green stone. He leaned down to study it and realized it was Fligh's prosthetic eye. It must have rolled away from the body. He pointed it out to Qui-Gon, who nodded.

Qui-Gon showed it to Captain Yur T'aug. "It belonged to the victim," he said.

The captain crouched to examine it. "Sergeant!" he called. "Tag this item."

Another officer scurried over with a specimen bag and carefully picked up the eye with a tweezer device.

"What was the cause of death?" Qui-Gon asked quietly.

"Strangulation, we believe," Captain Yur T'aug said shortly.

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"I saw the marks," Qui-Gon said. "It seems like a slender cord of some kind. Not hands." The captain nodded.

"And the unusual...ah, pallor?" Qui-Gon asked.

"The body was drained of blood," Captain Yur T'aug said. "He was killed elsewhere and then dropped off here."

Obi-Wan looked back at the tarp and shuddered again.

Qui-Gon's voice was calm. "Any suspects?"

The captain sighed, tapping his comlink with an impatient finger. "I should be investigating, not filling you in. You can read the report when I am done."

Qui-Gon did not show his impatience, but Obi-Wan could feel it. "I do not have time to read your report," he said, his voice as brittle as ice.

Captain Yur T'aug hesitated, then said, "No suspects yet. Nobody saw anything. But we know this High character. He's a well-known informant and petty thief. Could have a hundred enemies. Not to mention that he owes money all over town. I hear he has a major debt to the Tech Raiders."

Qui-Gon studied the officer for a moment. "There is something else," he said.

"This is not the first body we've found drained of blood," Captain Yur T'aug said hesitantly. "Drifters, lowlifes – beings no one would miss. Over the past year, there have been a half dozen. Maybe more we haven't found. Who knows? Coruscant can be a hard world. Many transients come here to scrounge a living."

"If this is the case, the killer is most likely not someone Fligh owed money to," Qui-Gon said.

Captain Yur T'aug shrugged. "Or else the killer copied the method to throw us off the track. It's our job to find out."

"You might want to check into a female bounty hunter," Qui-Gon said. "She's a Sorussian who might have had reason to dispose of Fligh. She's been staying at the Soft Landings Inn."

"Sure," Captain Yur T'aug said. "Thanks for the tip." His lack of interest was obvious.

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"Good luck to you," Qui-Gon said. "You should know that Didi Oddo will pay for the funeral. Fligh was not friendless. He will be missed."

Qui-Gon motioned to Obi-Wan, and they walked past the officers back onto the main walkway that curved around the Senate.

"Are you all right, Padawan?" Qui-Gon asked him.

"Fligh wasn't my friend," Obi-Wan said. "I only spent a few minutes with him. There was something likeable about him, but I can't say that I liked him. Yet I feel almost as sad as Didi."

"I do as well," Qui-Gon said.

They walked a few steps in silence. "Do you ever get used to death?" Obi-Wan asked.

"No," Qui-Gon said. "That is how it should be."

"Why do you think Fligh was killed?" Obi-Wan asked. "Do you think that he knew something important but didn't realize it, like Didi?"

"Perhaps," Qui-Gon said. "And remember that Fligh said he would try to help Didi. I wonder if he *did* try. No doubt it would be easy for him to discover where the bounty hunter was lodging."

"You think that is what happened?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Let us swing by the inn on the way back to the café," Qui-Gon suggested. "We should have another talk with this bounty hunter."

They walked quickly through the streets until they reached the Soft Landings Inn. This time the front door was slightly ajar, so they were able to walk in without ringing the innkeeper. They quickly climbed the stairs to the third level. Qui-Gon knocked on the door, and it swung open. The room was empty.

"She's gone." The Togorian stood behind them with a bucket and vibro-mop. "Checked out. I have to clean. Get out of my way."

They retreated down the stairs. "I don't like this," Qui-Gon murmured. "Let's get back to Didi's."

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They quickened their pace and began to run. Didi's wasn't far.

They swung around the corner. Ahead was the café. There was no spill of light from the windows, and the front door was shut tight.

"We are too late," Qui-Gon said.

Chapter Nine

Lightsabers drawn, they rushed into the café. With a quick sweep, they saw that it was empty. Plates with half-eaten food sat on the tables. Qui-Gon charged past the tables to the kitchen. Pots were overturned, their contents on the floor. Bins of flour and grain spilled onto the counters. The cooler door was open.

They ran to Didi's private office. Papers and files were thrown on the floor, the contents of durasteel bins upended and kicked through. Everything on the shelves had been tossed onto the floor.

"Upstairs," Qui-Gon barked.

He raced up, Obi-Wan on his heels. They burst into Didi's private quarters together.

In times of danger, Qui-Gon's senses slowed down. He took in everything in the room in what felt like several long seconds but was more likely the flicker of an eyelash. Astri on the floor, unconscious or dead. Didi standing, wrapped in the bounty hunter's whip, his eyes wide with terror, a bruise on his forehead. And the bounty hunter turning, pausing for an instant when she saw them. Her expressionless gaze showed no surprise, no fear.

Real time snapped back. Qui-Gon anticipated the bounty hunter's reach to the blaster strapped to her thigh. He moved forward to counterattack. He did not anticipate that she would

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aim at Astri, not at him. His Jedi reflexes were fast enough so that he was able to spin and turn, sweeping his lightsaber wide. He was slightly off-balance, but he managed to deflect the fire.

Astri stirred. Relief streamed through him. She was alive.

A perfect attack blended deception with speed and strategy. Qui-Gon feinted a pass to the bounty hunter's left and instead charged straight at her. She did not respond to the feint but fired straight, then leaped high to the left to avoid him. His lightsaber whizzed through empty air where she'd been.

She was even better than he'd thought.

Obi-Wan moved forward to cover Astri so that

Qui-Gon could concentrate on the attack. The bounty hunter activated her whip and retracted it. It spun off Didi in a dizzying circle, sending him flying against the wall. He hit it with a thud and fell to the floor, dazed.

The whip reverted to laser mode. With a slashing maneuver, the bounty hunter shattered the transparisteel in the window. Qui-Gon sprang forward, still keeping his body between his opponent and Astri. Didi began to crawl toward his daughter, getting underneath Qui-Gon's feet. Qui-Gon jumped to avoid him, his attention now focused on protecting Didi.

The bounty hunter leaped out the window. Outside was a small enclosure that held various speeders and swoops. She jumped into one and took off.

Qui-Gon stood at the window as the lights of the swoop twinkled and receded. He felt anger rock him, and he took a minute to accept and release it. His opponent had eluded him. Sometimes it happened. He had fought the best fight he could.

But she has eluded me three times now.

"Astri," Didi said brokenly. "Astri..."

Qui-Gon knelt by the young woman's side. He felt carefully around her skull. "What happened?" he asked Didi. "Did she get hit by blaster fire?"

"No, no. Knocked out from behind," Didi said. "With the handle of the whip."

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Qui-Gon felt a lump rising on Astri's skull. Her eyes fluttered open. Her pupils were not dilated and her eyes focused on his face.

"Ouch," she said.

"She's all right," he said to Didi. "Lie still, Astri. You're going to have a headache." She let out a hiss of air. "I'll say."

"We should call a medic," Didi said worriedly.

"I'm all right," Astri said. Wincing, she raised herself on her elbows. "What happened? The last thing I remember is all my customers going out the door."

"Did anyone come in while they were going out?" Qui-Gon asked.

"No," Astri said. "I locked the door behind them and told Renzii to go home. Locked the door behind him, too. Then I came upstairs. That's all I remember..."

"I was up here," Didi said. "I heard Astri on the stairs. She opened the door and suddenly fell down. Then the bounty hunter came in. She tied me up while she searched the place. She went downstairs and I heard her searching my private office."

"And the kitchen," Qui-Gon said.

"No, not the kitchen," Didi said.

"But it was chaos, pots everywhere," Obi-Wan said.

"It always looks that way," Astri said with a sigh. "What bounty hunter? I thought we were talking about a common thief."

"Why did the group leave?" Qui-Gon asked Astri.

Astri cradled her head in her hands. "I tried my best," she mumbled. "I guess I'm not quite elegant yet. Renzii kept mixing up the orders. I couldn't handle all the cooking. Some of the food was cold. So Jenna Zan Arbor had a fit, and they left. Next time I'll hire extra help. That was a big mistake. It's just that I spent all the extra money on the food..."

"So how did the bounty hunter get in?" Obi-Wan asked.

Astri lifted her head. "*What bounty hunter?*" she asked again in frustration.

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"Didi, tell her," Qui-Gon said.

"Not while you're hurt, Astri," Didi said nervously. "You need to lie down —"

"*What* bounty hunter?" Astri asked through clenched teeth.

"I might-ah-have gotten myself in a tiny spot of trouble," Didi told her. "Nothing serious."

"Sure," Astri said. "This isn't serious. Just another ordinary evening in the café. I get knocked out on a regular basis."

"What a sense of humor my daughter has,"

Didi said to the Jedi nervously. "Isn't she marvelous?"

"Your father may have a piece of information that is valuable to someone," Qui-Gon broke in impatiently. "That someone has sent a bounty hunter after him. We're assuming they want the information back at any cost. And yet, the bounty hunter did not kill him when she had the chance."

"That's a good sign," Didi said encouragingly. Then he looked fearful again. "Isn't it?"

"You're selling information again?" Astri yelled angrily. Then she winced and closed her eyes. She lowered her voice to a whisper. "You slimy, slithery, snaky son of a Kowakian monkey-lizard," she hissed through her teeth. "You lied to me. Again."

"I didn't lie so much as not tell you everything," Didi said, patting her shoulder. "I would not say that I have the thriving business I once did. But Fligh still came to me with bits and pieces to sell. How could I abandon him? Without me, how could he sell his little tidbits? It is tragic that he has been killed."

"Killed? See where his *business* has gotten him," Astri said, fixing her father with a steady stare. "Am I next, Papa?"

Didi turned away, unable to face his daughter. She got up unsteadily and left the room. "Let's return to what we know," Qui-Gon said to Didi. "The bounty hunter has not found what she is looking for. She tore this place apart. That means there is an actual object she wants, not just information in your head. What is it, Didi? This time you must tell the complete truth. You see now that you have put the ones you love in danger."

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"Yes," Didi said heavily. "I see that. But I cannot help you, my friend. I do not have anything. Fligh didn't give me anything but information. This I swear."

"Not a data pad?" Qui-Gon asked.

Didi shook his head. "Nothing."

Qui-Gon sighed. "Then there is no alternative. You must close up the café. Take Astri and leave Coruscant."

Astri was just returning to the room as Qui-Gon finished. She paused in the act of pressing a cold cloth to her head. "Close up the café?"

"Just until we know what the bounty hunter is looking for," Qui-Gon told her. "We can't stay by your side all day and all night, Astri. I think you are in danger as well as Didi." He paused, then said gently, "I know you are angry at your father, but you do not want to see him hurt."

Astri bit her lip and nodded. "But where will we go?"

"I know where," Didi said. "I have a house in the Cascardi Mountains."

"You bought a *house*?" Astri exclaimed. "But you say you have no money!"

"It was a deal I could not refuse," Didi explained. "I haven't even been there yet, and I haven't told anyone about it."

"Where are the Cascardi Mountains?" Obi-Wan asked.

"On the planet Duneeden," Qui-Gon said. "A short journey from Coruscant. But the mountains are a good choice. The Cascardis are remote and rugged. It's a good hideout for a time. Obi-Wan and I will wait while you pack a few things. You must leave quickly."

Didi sprang up and helped Astri from the room. They went into their bedrooms to pack.

"Do you think they'll be safe?" Obi-Wan asked Qui-Gon in a low tone.

"Safer than here on Coruscant," Qui-Gon said. "But the bounty hunter is no doubt an expert tracker. Even though the galaxy is wide, it's hard for beings to just disappear. No, I fear we

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must unravel this mystery. No matter where they are, Didi and Astri are still in great danger. She will find them, and it will be sooner rather than later. Of that I have no doubt."

Chapter Ten

As they entered the cool halls of the Jedi Temple, Qui-Gon saw the relief Obi-Wan tried to hide. The boy was worn out. Qui-Gon had not expected that a short stop to meet Didi would spiral into a twisting mystery they would be forced to solve.

"I did not plan for this, Padawan," he told him. "I just wanted to stop by to say hello to a friend."

Obi-Wan nodded. "But a friend was in danger. You could not refuse to help."

"You did not approve," Qui-Gon said.

He saw the hesitation on Obi-Wan's face. He knew the look well. Obi-Wan hated to disappoint him. But he never lied to him.

"No," he said. "Not at first. But now I do. You say I need to connect to the living Force. More and more I see what you mean. My first impulse was to turn away from Didi." Obi-Wan met his Master's eyes. "I was tired and hungry and I did not like Didi. I thought of my own needs. Now I see what you see. Didi has faults, but he is a good being. It just takes me longer to see these things. I wish," Obi-Wan said with difficulty, "it did not."

"You are too hard on yourself, Padawan," Qui-Gon said quietly. "That can become a fault if you are not careful, for anger at oneself is a destructive thing. Every living being can be

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impatient, can turn away at a first glance, can avoid getting involved. It is a natural impulse. We are all creatures who want peace and comfort. Yet we are Jedi. Our own peace and comfort is not what drives us. We are dedicated to a larger good. But always remember that the peace and comfort of just one being is what drives us, too."

Obi-Wan nodded. Qui-Gon put a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Get something to eat, Padawan," he said. "I am going to speak with Yoda and Tahl."

Qui-Gon could see Obi-Wan's hunger and fatigue battle with his desire to remain by his Master's side. "Are you certain you won't need me?"

"I will find you when I need you," Qui-Gon said. "What you need is a bit of rest and food. Then we'll continue."

He left Obi-Wan at the juncture toward the food hall. Then he made his way to the Room of a Thousand Fountains, where he was to meet Yoda and Tahl. He had contacted them on his comlink to arrange the meeting.

The cool, moist air revived Qui-Gon better than a meal would have. His eyes rested on the multitude of shades of green in the plants and trees that were arranged amid the winding paths. He paused for a moment to register the beauty around him. He drew a long breath, then another, concentrating on the shades of green, the murmuring fountains, the scent of growth and flowers. He let the moment matter, fill his heart and mind. Refreshed, he headed down the winding paths toward Yoda and Tahl.

They sat on a bench that Yoda favored, where water ran over smooth white pebbles, making a musical sound. Tahl must have heard his step, for she turned her head toward him.

"I hope you allowed Obi-Wan to get a decent meal," she called in a humorous tone before he could speak. "That poor boy is always hungry."

Qui-Gon grinned. Tahl never said hello. Instead she always launched right into a conversation. "Do you realize," he said,

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seating himself on a bench opposite them, "that you always give me an accusation, never a greeting?"

Tahl smiled. "Of course. How else can I keep you on your toes?"

Qui-Gon let his eyes rest on Tahl's lovely face. Her sightless green- and-gold striped eyes were alive with humor. Once he had not been able to look upon her without pain. Just the sight of the white scar that marked her dark honey skin had grieved him. But he had come to realize how Tahl had accepted her fate, how she had allowed it to deepen her. Her friendship was invaluable to him.

"I left him at the food hall," Qui-Gon said. "I am sure he's on his second helping by now."

"No news have you?" Yoda asked. "Concerned we are about Didi. A scoundrel he may be, but a friend to the Temple he is."

"I am sorry to report that things are worse rather than better," Qui-Gon said. Quickly, he filled them in on the murder of Fligh and the attack on Astri and Didi.

"Fligh's body was drained of blood?" Tahl frowned. "That sounds familiar."

"There have been a half dozen similar cases on Coruscant over the past year," Qui-Gon said. "Mostly drifters, beings with no ties to anyone."

"Yes, I know that," Tahl said. "It is something else." Her frown deepened. "There is one more thing. I did some more investigating on your bounty hunter. It seems she is a master of disguise. She uses wigs, synth-flesh, prosthetics...that is how she moves about undetected."

"I am not surprised to hear it," Qui-Gon said. "Obi-Wan saw her turn from an elderly man back into a young woman."

"Say you did that Fligh stole a data pad from a Senator," Yoda said. "Who?"

"Someone I did not know," Qui-Gon said. "Senator Uta S'orn from the planet Belasco."

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"By the way, I contacted the security police," Tahl told him. "Senator S'orn never reported the theft. It might not be significant. The Senate is full of petty thieves. I'm sure many thefts do not get reported. Still, I thought I'd mention it. Senator S'orn also announced her resignation today. She said it was for personal reasons."

"Know Senator S'orn, I do," Yoda said. "Several talks she had with the Jedi."

Startled, Qui-Gon turned to Yoda. "About what?"

"A son she had," Yoda continued. "Ren S'orn. Force-sensitive, he was. Accepted him for training, we did. Part with him, his mother could not. Harness the Force, understand it, he could not. Wandered he did through the galaxy."

Tahl gave a sharp intake of breath. "Of course," she whispered. Yoda nodded.

"What is it?" Qui-Gon asked, leaning forward urgently. He saw that Yoda and Tahl knew something important.

"Ren became a lost being, a drifter," Tahl said. "He lost contact with his mother. At last she came to us for help. Several teams of Jedi were sent to find him and help him. He rejected them."

"Hoped we did that he would reach out one day," Yoda said. "Feared we did that he would use the Force for evil. Yet the Force merely confused and angered him. Different he was. Different he did not want to be. Peace he could not find."

"Such a tragedy," Tahl said. "He could not find a way to flourish. He could not find a place that felt like home. So as it often happens he fell in with bad companions. We received word that he had been killed."

"Not long ago, it was," Yoda said. "Six months, I think. On Simpla-12."

"This is sad news," Qui-Gon said. "But why is it significant?"

"Because of the manner of his death," Tahl said quietly. "Ren had been strangled. And his body had been drained of blood."

Chapter Eleven

Obi-Wan saw at once from Qui-Gon's grim face that he would not get to savor his tart. He scrambled to his feet.

"I am sorry, Padawan. But it is time to go," Qui-Gon said.

Obi-Wan snatched up the tart and wolfed it down while they walked. Qui-Gon checked out a speeder from the transport pool. Within seconds, they were heading back toward the Senate building.

It was late evening, and the air lanes still buzzed with traffic. The glow lights made the buildings and walkways blaze as bright as daylight. Beings strolled below them, crowding the restaurants and walkways.

"What did Yoda and Tahl say?" Obi-Wan asked, swallowing the last bite of his tart.

"I don't have a clear picture yet," Qui-Gon told him. "But somehow Senator S'orn is either connected to Fligh's death or involved in it. Her son died the same way Fligh did." Qui-Gon explained the story of Ren's confused life and tragic death.

"But what does that have to do with Didi?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Maybe nothing." Qui-Gon guided the transport along the crowded air space surrounding the Senate.

"But it doesn't make sense," Obi-Wan said. "Her son died on another planet. And Didi has never met Senator S'orn."

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"It doesn't make sense, true," Qui-Gon answered. "But it *has* to, somehow. We just have to figure out the connection."

Qui-Gon left the speeder in the Senate landing area. He strode into the Senate building. The usually crowded hallways were almost empty. Their footsteps echoed on the slate floor.

"What makes you think she'll be here so late?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Because her resignation was announced," Qui-Gon answered. "No doubt she had a busy afternoon. And she seems the kind of Senator to work late. Most of them leave as soon as Senate business has concluded." Qui-Gon paused, then remarked, "The Senate is not what it was. And it is getting worse. It has lost one idealist after another."

They made their way to the Senator's office. The outer office was dark, but Qui-Gon knocked on the inner door.

"Come in."

They entered. Only one light was on in the office. Senator S'orn sat in a chair, staring out at the bright Coruscant night. "Yes?" she asked without turning.

Qui-Gon closed the door behind them. "We regret having to disturb you."

She spun the chair around and sighed. "It has been a day of disturbances. I didn't expect my announcement to cause such a stir. I guess there's not much else going on."

"I do not wish to bring up something that is no doubt painful for you," Qui-Gon said gently. "But is your son's death the reason you are leaving?"

Senator S'orn's face changed. Her features hardened and her lips thinned. "Yes, I know why you are here. I should have given him up for Temple training. I was selfish."

"No," Qui-Gon said quickly. "Not at all. Many parents choose to keep a Force-sensitive child. There are many paths in life. You make the best choice you can for your child."

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"So I chose to keep him with me, and that decision destroyed him," Senator S'orn said bitterly. "I chose a path that led to death."

"No, Ren chose his own path," Qui-Gon said firmly. "Senator S'orn, I do not know you. But I have known many Force-sensitive children. There is no more guarantee a Force-sensitive child will grow up to find happiness than one who does not have that ability. Many do not choose the Jedi path. Some flourish outside the Temple, and some do not. We are not here to question your decision or blame you."

"There is no need. I blame myself," Senator S'orn said bleakly. "Ever since I heard the news of Ren's death, I have been unable to focus, unable to do my job the way it needs to be done. I have managed to concentrate for only brief periods of time. What right have I to serve my people when I could not save my son?"

"I cannot answer that question for you," Qui-Gon said. "But perhaps you are right to take time apart from your life's journey. I have found such a time helpful, if you can look at your choices with forgiveness and calm."

"Forgiveness and calm seem very far away when your son is dead," Senator S'orn said in a choked voice. She spun her chair around so that her back was to them. When she turned again, she had composed herself. "But if you didn't come here to blame me, you certainly didn't come to counsel me, Qui-Gon Jinn. What is it that you are looking for?"

"I'm not quite sure," Qui-Gon said honestly. "Tell me something. When your data pad was stolen, why didn't you report the theft?"

She shrugged. "The chances of Senate security finding it were slim. My friend's data pad was stolen as well. Jenna didn't think it worthwhile to report. We were both too busy to bother."

Qui-Gon's watchful gaze turned alert. "Jenna?"

"Jenna Zan Arbor," Senator S'orn said. "She's a friend of mine, visiting the Senate for a conference. Surely you've heard of

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her. She's the foremost transgenic scientist in the galaxy, and a great humanitarian."

"Of course," Qui-Gon said. "You were together when the theft occurred?"

"It was in one of the hall cafés," Senator S'orn said. "We were having lunch."

Obi-Wan controlled his excitement. Something was about to break. He knew it. Fliqh stole the data pad, and Jenna booked Didi's for an important dinner. Was this a connection that would lead them somewhere? As Qui-Gon had said earlier, it didn't make sense, but it had to.

"Was there anyone else in the café?"

Senator S'orn sighed. "Do you mean, was the thief there? I assume so. Don't you think I've gone over this? The café was crowded. I didn't notice anyone suspicious."

"How about a tall, slender human male with one dark eye and one bright green eye?"

Senator S'orn looked startled. "Yes. But he couldn't be the thief. He's a Senatorial aide. Or at least he said so. We were discussing a dinner that Jenna was going to host for the other scientists attending the conference. He handed out a card for a restaurant nearby that he said was excellent. Jenna took the card. I had never heard of it, but Jenna said she would look into it."

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan exchanged a glance.

"Was that the thief? Should I report him?" Senator S'orn asked.

Qui-Gon stood. "It would be to no purpose. He is dead. Thank you for your time, Senator."

Obi-Wan followed Qui-Gon from the office. "So we have a connection," he said. "Fliqh and Didi to Jenna Zan Arbor and Senator S'orn."

"Not to mention to Ren S'orn," Qui-Gon said. "No doubt Jenna Zan Arbor knew about Senator S'orn's son."

"But I still don't see what it all means," Obi-Wan said, frustrated. "It's all so confusing." "Ask yourself this question,

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Padawan. Who would benefit from Fligh's death? Or Didi's?" "No one," Obi-Wan said. "Not now, anyway. Unless there is something else on that data pad that we don't know about."

"Exactly," Qui-Gon said. "Either data pad – remember, we now know that Jenna Zan Arbor's data pad was stolen, too."

Obi-Wan nodded. "I have a feeling I know where we're heading next."

"Yes," Qui-Gon said. "To see Jenna Zan Arbor."

Chapter Twelve

Obi-Wan stood uneasily in the lobby of the luxury hotel. He had been in palaces and grand houses before. He had seen luxurious surroundings, thick carpets, fine metals, ornately carved furniture. He had observed without feeling part of it, as a Jedi should. He had never felt awkward, even in the palace of a queen.

But here he felt differently. The walls were of a white polished stone with veins of pinkish gold. The floor under his feet was black hard stone, polished to a high sheen. He was afraid to sit on the plush sofas and chairs. He suddenly noticed the stains of his dessert on his tunic.

The rich swirled around him, coming to and fro from the many restaurants off the lobby, or picking up mail and keys. Their eyes slid past him, as if he was not worth their notice. Their voices were low and hushed, unlike the busy chatter on the crowded streets.

As usual, Qui-Gon looked perfectly at ease. He walked to the desk and asked the clerk to ring Jenna Zan Arbor's room.

The clerk spoke into a private comlink headpiece and listened for a moment. "You may go up," he said. Then he directed them to the turbolift that would take them to the seventy-seventh floor.

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Obi-Wan followed Qui-Gon into a large lift tube lined with a rosy stone that made him feel as though he were in the center of a flower. The tube doors opened, and he stepped out onto a thick, cushioned carpet.

Jenna Zan Arbor waited in the doorway of her suite. She was dressed in a septsilk robe of deep blue that hung stiffly to her feet. Her blond hair was again twisted in an elaborate style and wound through with multicolored fabric.

Qui-Gon bowed. "Thank you for seeing us. I am Qui-Gon Jinn and this is Obi-Wan Kenobi."

She returned the bow. "Jenna Zan Arbor. I'm honored to greet the Jedi." She gave them another look. "But you were at the café."

"We are friends of Astri and Didi Oddo," Qui-Gon said.

Jenna Zan Arbor looked a little less welcoming.

She turned and led them into a vast room with the same polished black stone floor as the lobby. Plush white sofas were arranged in two seating areas, one intimate and one grand. Gauzy white draperies hung at the floor- to-ceiling windows and pooled on the floor. Outside, the lights of the passing traffic were like traveling stars through a fine mist.

Jenna Zan Arbor ushered them to the most intimate grouping. Obi-Wan sat down and immediately sank into the cushions. He tried to sit erect but found himself slipping backward.

Zan Arbor waved her hand at the room. "I don't feel comfortable with all this. But the conference is paying for it. I'm used to a more... practical environment. I spend most of my time in my lab." She turned luminous gray eyes to them. "What can I do for you?"

"We are investigating a murder," Qui-Gon said. "Someone you spoke with at the Senate. His name was Fligh. He posed as a Senatorial aide and gave you a card for Didi's restaurant –"

"Of course, I remember," Zan Arbor said immediately. "He had one green eye. He praised the food and atmosphere of this

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place. I don't know Coruscant very well, so I followed up on the tip."

"Why did you leave the café so abruptly tonight?" Qui-Gon asked.

The scientist gave a low laugh. "Because my guests were miserable. It was not what I had been led to expect. I know that sounds snobbish, but I was trying to make a good impression. The conference has a number of grants for scientific projects. I need funding." She shrugged slender shoulders. "So we came back here and the hotel accommodated us." She paused. "But why should my dinner have anything to do with this person's death?"

Instead of answering, Qui-Gon asked another question. "You are friends with Senator S'orn?" "Yes."

"And you know that her son died, and how he died, I presume," Qui-Gon said.

Zan Arbor nodded, but a frosty look took over her warm gaze. "Of course I do. I hardly think it's your business. That was a great tragedy for Uta."

"Not for you, though," Qui-Gon stated.

She gave him a hard look. "No. I was sorry for my friend, but it was not a personal tragedy. What are you implying?"

"Nothing at all," Qui-Gon said easily. "We are just investigating. Could I have a list of the guests at your dinner?"

"Why?" Zan Arbor asked, irritation now coloring her even tone.

"Because someone attacked the owner and his daughter after your party left," Qui-Gon answered. "I don't think it's necessary, but later it might help if we could question them."

"I hardly think..." Zan Arbor's irritated tone ended in a shrug. "Why not. I have nothing to hide." She crossed to a desk and scrawled some names on a durasheet, then handed it to Obi-Wan. He tucked it in his tunic.

She sat down again. "Can I ask you what Ren S'orn's murder has to do with this Fligh person, or the attack at the café?"

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"Maybe nothing at all," Qui-Gon said.

The scientist's gaze was cool. "I think I'm beginning to understand. You don't want information from me. You think I may be involved."

"I did not mean to imply that," Qui-Gon said.

"Yet here you are," she pointed out crisply. "I assume you know who I am."

Qui-Gon nodded.

"I'm not accustomed to someone coming to my private quarters and linking me to a murder. Murder is not a topic that is familiar to me. I live in the world of transgenic research. So you must forgive me if I'm a little confused and upset."

"Of course," Qui-Gon said. "Murder is an upsetting topic."

Zan Arbor gave a brief smile. "Especially for the victim. Let's finish this. What else do you need to know?"

"Why didn't you report the theft of your data pad?" Qui-Gon asked. "You must have been upset about it."

"I was not upset. I have backup of all my files on data cards."

"Uta S'orn was upset," Qui-Gon said.

"She had a reason to be," Zan Arbor answered, an edge to her voice. "She had private information on that data pad. She was forced to resign before pushing through an important piece of legislation."

"Do you happen to know what that is?" Obi-Wan asked. He had been content to watch Qui-Gon ask the questions. But the legislation had come up before, and he was curious to know what it was.

"Yes. Uta told me all about it. I wasn't that interested, frankly. My head is full of science. But apparently she was trying to put together a coalition of planets to join together to fight some sort of black market tech gang. She probably had all the votes she needed. But her resignation changed that. Without her to hold the alliance together, things will probably fall apart. Are we through?"

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Obi-Wan did not look at Qui-Gon, but elation surged through him. This was a crucial clue. The Tech Raiders had a reason to want to discredit Senator S'orn. She was trying to pass a law that could lead to their destruction. Helb knew both Fligh and Didi. Here was the link. No doubt Helb had recruited Fligh to steal the Senator's data pad. Fligh had gone further and stolen the scientist's; most likely for his own profit. All they had to do now was figure out how Didi was involved.

So Senator S'orn and Jenna Zan Arbor were just what they appeared to be: two powerful women who were simply victims of petty theft.

He did not need to glance at his Master to know that Qui-Gon had reached the same conclusions.

"We're through," Qui-Gon said.

Obi-Wan felt a thrill as they left the hotel suite and entered the turbolift.

"This is it," he said. "This is the connection we've been looking for. We're close to solving the mystery."

"Perhaps," Qui-Gon said. "We need to talk to Helb again, that is certain."

"Tomorrow we'll solve the mystery, and Didi and Astri can come home," Obi-Wan said. "If we confront the Tech Raiders with what we know, they'll have to recall the bounty hunter. It's got to be them, doesn't it? They wanted to prevent that legislation from going through. Somehow Fligh got Didi mixed up in it. Maybe they hoped to sell both data pads to some other party. That would definitely anger Helb."

The lift tube doors opened and they walked out into the grand lobby. The floor-to-ceiling windows revealed the black night outside.

"It's too late to find Helb now," Qui-Gon said. "Let's return to the Temple. We both need sleep."

Outside the side door was a large landing platform for the many vehicles of the guests of the hotel. Qui-Gon had left their

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speeder close to the door so that they would be able to leave quickly, but now a row of other vehicles had blocked it in.

He signaled to the parking clerk. "Can you move those other vehicles?"

"Right away, sir," the young boy replied. He jumped into the first speeder to move it.

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan headed toward their own vehicle. Qui-Gon slipped into the driver's seat. Obi-Wan had a bit more trouble getting into the passenger side. The speeder was jammed up next to another. He had to swing one leg up and over in order to enter.

He was in the middle of the maneuver when he felt a sudden jolt send him flying backward. The clerk had backed his speeder into the one behind. Obi-Wan slid backward on the smooth metal. Behind him was the railing. Past that was only the empty air.

"Hey, you – " Qui-Gon suddenly vaulted out of the driver's seat, alert to danger.

He was too late. The clerk hit the speeder behind his again, and the Jedi's speeder jolted backward. Obi-Wan felt himself slide off the back end of the speeder. He was thrown over the railing, straight into space.

Chapter Thirteen

Everything had happened so fast, but Obi-Wan's extraordinary reflexes gave him a second to plan. It was enough. As he shot over the railing, he was already accessing his liquid cable launcher. He aimed it at the platform edge. It engaged.

The line played out, and he swung in empty space. It was an eerie feeling. A cruiser zoomed by him, its driver surprised to see a boy dangling in the middle of a space lane.

Obi-Wan felt sweat trickle down his flanks. He retracted the launcher, and it carried him up to the platform level. Qui-Gon was waiting.

"That was fast thinking, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said, relieved and agitated. "Your reflexes did not fail you. I should have been more alert."

"Where is the parking clerk?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Took off in the speeder," Qui-Gon said grimly.

"Do you think the bounty hunter bribed him?"

"I think the boy was the bounty hunter," Qui-Gon said. "We will not make that mistake again." He felt lightheaded with relief and realized that fatigue had set in at last. "Come. We can't do any more tonight. We need to rest. At least we know the bounty hunter is still on Coruscant and is not tracking Didi and Astri."

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By the time they reached the Temple, Obi-Wan's steps were dragging. His close call had cost him. Qui-Gon was glad to send him to his quarters.

Back in his own quarters, Qui-Gon lay on his sleep couch in the darkness. He wished for rest, but even a Jedi could not summon sleep when the mind was active.

She had deceived him again. She had nearly killed Obi-Wan. She was thinking faster than he was. It was because his preoccupation with the *whys* of the investigation was leading him to be less vigilant. He had been more worried about Didi than about his own Padawan.

Qui-Gon thought back to the interview with Jenna Zan Arbor. Obi-Wan was right. It made sense that the Tech Raiders would want to steal Senator S'orn's data pad. No doubt they had engaged Fligh for the task. It was in Fligh's character to hold out on them. And it was possible that Fligh had concealed the data pad within the café, involving Didi. Perhaps he'd tried to retrieve it and that was why he'd been killed.

Qui-Gon stared at the ceiling. Logic told him that this scenario made sense. Why couldn't he sleep?

It was because the killing of Fligh did not seem like the job of a criminal gang like the Tech Raiders. They did not need to disguise their work, to send the Coruscant security forces on the wrong path. They arrogantly thought themselves too big to care about a local investigation.

No, Fligh's murder still did not make sense. That indicated to Qui-Gon that it was about emotion, not logic.

He thought back to Senator S'orn. He had glimpsed the despair and bitterness deep within her. Such emotions could drive someone to evil, certainly.

Jenna Zan Arbor appeared to have nothing to hide. Yet it still bothered him that she'd shown up at Didi's Café. True, she didn't know Coruscant, but her friend did. She could have asked for a recommendation from Uta S'orn. Why did she take the advice of a stranger?

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*Murder is an upsetting topic.
Especially for the victim.*

There was something cold in the way Jenna Zan Arbor had smiled when she made that light remark. Her smile was keeping Qui-Gon awake.

And the vision of Obi-Wan shooting over that railing into deep space while he scrambled to get to him. And the knowledge that the bounty hunter would likely return to Didi and Astri's trail.

Yes, he had much on his mind.

He reached out to the night. He pulled the darkness around himself. He drew long slow breaths. He could do nothing tonight. His worry about Didi and Astri would simmer inside him, would flare to life again in the morning. Until then, he would sleep.

The next morning, Helb was nowhere to be found.

"This is suspicious," Obi-Wan said. "No doubt he knows that we are on to him."

Qui-Gon had decided not to share his feeling that the Tech Raiders were not responsible for Fligh's death. He had only cloudy doubts and vague feelings to report; he wanted more concrete evidence.

And Helb knew more than he was telling. That was certain.

"There is only one place left he can be," Qui-Gon said. "Vandor-3. He's got to be at the base. We should get answers there."

Vandor-3 was a neighboring satellite planet of Coruscant. Luckily Qui-Gon had taken a cruiser from the Temple landing platform, just in case they needed to travel beyond Coruscant's atmosphere. It was a short journey to Vandor-3.

They hovered outside the base's air space until they were given clearance to land. Qui-Gon saw the landing platform below, in the midst of what looked like a salvage yard. He eased

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the cruiser down between a maintenance hauler and a sea of swoops.

As soon as they released the loading ramp and exited, they were assaulted by noise. Workers and droids were everywhere, cutting metal, soldering circuits, dragging materials, operating gravsleds. Voices were raised in argument over the loud buzzing of hydraulic metal cutters, macrofusers, and hydrospanners. Enormous repulsorlift engines hung over their heads on a system of straps and pulleys. Speeder parts, circuit boards, boosters, converters, and other parts Obi-Wan did not recognize were divided into various piles.

"This is quite an operation," Qui-Gon said as they edged their way past a starship, its engine parts laid out on the floor.

"Watch out for that acceleration compensator!" a voice bellowed.

Obi-Wan took a quick step sideways to avoid the equipment as Helb barreled toward them, his orange eyes sparking irritation.

"I'm guessing you didn't come here for a deal on speeder parts," he yelled over the noise.

"Just information," Qui-Gon yelled back.

"Well, you're in the way here. Follow me."

The Jedi followed Helb into a quieter corner of the yard. A small shed made out of salvaged materials stood against a durasteel fence. Helb pushed the door open.

Inside, the din dulled to a dim roar.

"I'd ask you to sit, but you're leaving," Helb snapped. "I thought I made it clear that I've told you all I know."

"I don't think you have," Qui-Gon said. "I think you've left something out. I think your gang hired Fligh to steal Senator S'orn's data pad. Most likely Fligh had to agree to do it because he owed you money."

Helb didn't say anything. He crossed his arms.

"Maybe Fligh didn't turn over the data pad. Maybe he thought he could get more money out of you," Qui-Gon guessed, watching Helb carefully. "Maybe that's why you put the

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deathmark on his head. You suspected he had given the data pad to Didi."

"Listen, I'm not pretending to be overflowing with goodness, Jedi," Helb said. "I'd sell out my brother for money. But we didn't put a death mark on Fligh. Now get out of here before I call the security droids."

Qui-Gon didn't move. He put one hand on his lightsaber hilt. Obi-Wan did the same.

Helb shifted uncomfortably. "Look, we don't want to get on the wrong side of the Jedi."

"Then tell us the truth, and we will go," Qui-Gon said.

"All right, all right. Yes, we did get Fligh to steal the data pad. The bantha-brain stole the wrong one! He should have taken her official data pad, not the one with her personal correspondence. But it worked out fine, because we didn't know she was planning to resign. We got what we wanted anyway. Her legislation is dead. Why would we put a death mark on Fligh? Sure, he was a weasel, but he was a valuable weasel. Sent a lot of clients our way."

"High stole two data pads that day," Qui-Gon said. "Do you know what happened to the other one?"

Helb shrugged. "Probably sold it, or gave it to someone he owed money to."

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon exchanged a glance. "Didi," Obi-Wan murmured.

"Maybe," Helb said, overhearing him. "I'm sure Fligh owed Didi, too. Didi is the shrewdest sabacc player around. We all played that game of sabacc together. I lost to Didi, too. None of us could pay off Didi that day, but he let us slide. I didn't pay him off until a few days later. Luckily I had something to trade with."

"What did you trade?" Qui-Gon asked.

"I passed along this hideout I had in the Cascardi Mountains," Helb said. "I never would have used it, anyway. I won it in a game of chance off some old fool wrapped in a pile of cloaks at

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the Splendor. As a matter of fact, it was the day I met the two of you – "

Helb didn't get a chance to finish his sentence.

The two Jedi were gone.

Chapter Fourteen

From above, the house in the Cascardi Mountains looked quiet. It was a white, three-story structure built into the mountainside that blended in with the snow. They could see Didi's cruiser parked on the small landing platform that was off the second floor. There was no sign of Didi and Astri.

Qui-Gon landed their cruiser next to Didi's. They climbed out and approached the door with caution. They kept their lightsabers in their hands but not activated. This time, they would be prepared.

Qui-Gon concentrated, listening for movement, for anything out of the ordinary. Obi-Wan was tense beside him. He trusted the boy's instincts. "What do you think?" he asked quietly. "I'm not feeling anything clearly," Obi-Wan said. "Yet something is wrong. As though Didi and Astri are not in danger, but danger is here."

Qui-Gon nodded. "I feel that, too. She has lured them here. No wonder she remained on Coruscant and trailed us. She did not have to track Didi and Astri. She knew where they were. The sooner we get them away from here, the better."

A window slid open above them, and Didi popped his head out. Relief creased his features. "It's you, thank the moons and stars. I'll activate the door for you. I am so very glad to see you."

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A moment later the door slid open. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan walked inside and were met by Didi as he hurried down a curving ramp from upstairs.

"Is everything all right?" Qui-Gon asked, clipping his lightsaber back onto his utility belt.

Didi nodded. "I suppose. At first we were glad to be here. We felt safe. The place is so remote and hidden. But now the isolation is getting on our nerves. I think we would feel safer back on Coruscant."

"Where is Astri?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Here." Astri appeared from the other room. "I am so happy to see you both. The hours have been very long."

"No sign of trouble?" Qui-Gon asked. "Nothing out of the ordinary?"

"Nothing," Didi said.

"We keep a lookout," Astri said. "We watch out the windows for cruisers. We saw you approach. We weren't sure who it was." She tapped a blaster strapped to her hip. "I was ready."

"Have you ever used a blaster before, Astri?" Qui-Gon asked cautiously.

"How hard could it be?" Astri said. "Point and shoot. Easy as making a meal."

After having seen her kitchen, Qui-Gon was not sure he trusted Astri's shooting. "I'll give you a lesson in a moment," he told her. "How about you, Didi? Do you have a weapon?"

"Are you serious?" Didi shook his head. "I don't like Astri having one, either. How do you think I managed to stay out of trouble all these years?"

"We must speak to you both seriously," Qui-Gon said. "You must tell us the truth. Your safety depends on it."

"But you said we were safe here," Didi said nervously.

Qui-Gon shook his head. "I did not. This only bought us time. I'm afraid time has run out."

"What do you need to know?" Astri asked. Qui-Gon turned to Didi. "Fligh stole two data pads. We think one of them is the

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key to your problem. He must have given one to you, Didi. Did he leave a case, or a bin, or anything with you? Could he have hidden something when your back was turned?"

"I would never turn my back on Fligh," Didi said. "You have asked me this already, my friend. I give you the same answer. Fligh gave me nothing."

Obi-Wan noticed a flush spread over Astri's cheeks.

"What about you, Astri?" he asked.

She glanced at her father. "Well. Sometimes I used Fligh for more than sweeping."

"You used Fligh?" Didi asked, incredulous. "After you told me I should not associate with him?"

Astri looked uncomfortable. "We were not getting enough business. I'd spent so much money on the café. If it closed you'd never let me forget it. And I knew that Fligh hung around the Senate. I paid him to pass along tips to me about which Senators would be hosting important dinners. Then I could have a head start and bid on the job. Recently Fligh came to me with two pieces of information: one, that someone might throw Senator S'orn a going-away party soon, and two, that Jenna Zan Arbor was hosting a testimonial dinner. I paid him for both tips."

"You paid him for information? Ha!" Didi cried. "I am not the only one in this family to stretch the truth a bit!"

"This isn't the time to reproach Astri," Qui-Gon said sternly.

"I am not reproaching! I am *congratulating*," Didi insisted.

Astri's cheeks were pink. "Anyway, Fligh gave me a data pad for safekeeping. He told me he had just traded for it. He asked me to keep it for him. I was in the middle of something, so I stuck it in one of the ovens. The oven was broken," she added hastily. "To tell you the truth, I forgot about it until the night we left."

"Where is it now?" Qui-Gon asked urgently.

"Here," Astri said. "I brought it with us. My data pad was smashed, so I thought I'd use this one."

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She reached over to a nearby table and handed it to Qui-Gon. "I haven't had a chance to see what's on it yet."

Qui-Gon quickly accessed the files on the data pad. A strange code streamed across the screen.

"The files are all coded," he mused.

"They must be Jenna Zan Arbor's," Obi-Wan said, looking over his shoulder. "These are probably formulas."

"Yes. Let me send it to Tahl. She can take it to our code experts." Qui-Gon jacked into the data pad and transferred the files to his own com-link. He then contacted Tahl.

"Sure, send it along," Tahl said. "I'll get right on it and contact you as soon as we break it."

"This is high priority," Qui-Gon told her. He switched off the connection. "I don't think we should wait. I have several destinations in mind. There are contacts who can hide you," he told Didi and Astri.

"I won't mind leaving this place," Astri said with a shiver. "It's awfully lonely. Just us and the lonesome wind. The caretaker told us there's no one here at this time of year. At first we thought this an advantage."

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon froze.

"Caretaker?" Qui-Gon asked.

"She came with the place," Didi said. "Relax, Qui-Gon. She's at least a hundred years old."

"Where is she?" Qui-Gon asked, his hand on his lightsaber.

Astri looked puzzled. "She brings provisions once a day. She's not here now."

Qui-Gon's uneasy feeling changed to alarm. Simultaneously, the two Jedi activated their lightsabers.

"Let's get to the cruiser," Qui-Gon said. "But our things – " Astri began.

"Leave them."

They started toward the door, but it was too late. At that moment, durasteel coverings on the windows slid down with a

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clang. They heard the harsh sound of locks snapping throughout the house. The snug hideaway had turned into a prison.

They were trapped. And Qui-Gon had no doubt that the bounty hunter was in the house with them.

Chapter Fifteen

"What's going on?" Didi whispered.

"Where is the lighting console?" Qui-Gon asked Didi.

"Over there." Didi pointed to a console that was mounted on a table.

Qui-Gon strode over and powered down all the lights. Darkness dropped like a curtain. Obi-Wan could not see a thing, but he waited, knowing his eyes would adjust.

"Remember how she fought last time, Padawan," Qui-Gon said to him in a murmur. "Her strategy is to attack those we defend in order to keep us busy. Expect her to move in their direction first. Watch her shoulders to tell you which way she will move."

"I have the data pad, Qui-Gon," Astri whispered. "It's in my tunic."

"Keep it safe," Qui-Gon whispered back. "We don't need it anymore, but it is our insurance. If the bounty hunter thinks we can tell her where it is, she won't kill us."

"Ah, reassuring news," Didi said. His voice shook with terror.

"Stay between us," Qui-Gon instructed Didi and Astri. "We can't protect you if you stray. We're going to cut through those window shields."

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They moved forward with Astri and Didi between them. Obi-Wan's vision had adjusted and he kept his eyes moving around the room, waiting for a shadow to move and materialize into the bounty hunter.

But even he was not prepared for how fast she struck. The laser whip came out of nowhere, spiraling in the air toward Astri. Qui-Gon leaped forward, lightsaber already slashing downward. It collided with the whip. A harsh buzzing sound rose from the contact.

The whip curled back and struck again, this time toward Didi. Obi-Wan was prepared, stepping into his left-to-right sweep. The whip wrapped around his lightsaber and smoked before uncurling and flying backward. The lightsaber could not cut it.

He could see her now. At least he could see the shape of her body. He could not see her eyes. She was dressed all in black; it was hard to track her as she moved. Only the slight gleam of her boots and armor told him where she was heading. She did not make a sound.

The whip unfurled again, dancing over their heads as though it were a living thing. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan kept their lightsabers moving, twirling them above their heads to fend off the lethal whip. All the while Qui-Gon pressed steadily forward.

Suddenly Astri began to fire her blaster. Her shots went widely off the mark, peppering the durasteel over the windows. The blasts ricocheted back toward them. Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon had to move quickly to deflect them. In the meantime, the whip snaked out again and knocked the blaster from Astri's hand. It skittered across the floor.

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan kept moving toward the windows. The bounty hunter realized their objective and sprang forward, somersaulting in a blur toward them. Her move ended in a sharp kick, close enough to land a glancing blow at Astri's ribs. A slight clang resulted from the sole of her boot hitting Astri's tunic. Obi-Wan saw the knowledge in the bounty hunter's face. She knew that Astri had the data pad.

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Pushing Astri behind him, Qui-Gon launched an attack at the bounty hunter. She kept the whip moving in a blur of light. Suddenly she flipped backward in a series of fast moves, eluding the Jedi. She was still between them and the windows. In a quick reversal of strategy, Qui-Gon pushed Astri and Didi up the ramp.

"Run," he directed.

The bounty hunter was still flipping over, thinking she needed to put distance between herself and the Jedi. She would need time to find her feet and reverse again to face them.

"Run, Padawan," Qui-Gon said.

Obi-Wan dashed up the ramp. He guessed what Qui-Gon was thinking. If they could get to the windows above, they could cut through the durasteel. From there it would be an easy drop to the landing platform. He heard Qui-Gon hit the ramp behind him.

As they reached the upper level, their keen hearing told them that the bounty hunter was in fast pursuit. Quickly, Qui-Gon opened a shelving unit with various cubbyholes that ran along the wall with the windows.

"Don't come out until I get you," he told Didi and Astri, herding them inside.

He shut the doors after them and motioned to Obi-Wan to get to work on the durasteel blocked windows. Then he rushed forward to meet the bounty hunter as she ran up the curving ramp. She came into sight in seconds but instead of meeting Qui-Gon she gave a leap in the air. She grabbed onto the system of conduit pipes near the ceiling and used her momentum to fly over Qui-Gon's head, straight at Obi-Wan.

Obi-Wan kicked out with one leg as he tried to turn to meet the attack. He had been in an awkward position, just beginning to cut through the durasteel with his lightsaber. He felt the studded spikes on the end of the whip catch his leg as he turned. The pain seared him, but he kept moving, raising his lightsaber to meet the flashing whip.

Without Astri and Didi to defend, the Jedi were now free to attack. They moved toward the bounty hunter as one unit,

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lightsabers whirling and arcing, anticipating her moves and the striking, curling whip.

Obi-Wan remembered Qui-Gon's directive to watch the bounty hunter's shoulders. Her footwork was fast but she had a tendency to lean into her moves.

She began to retreat backward, though the action of her whip did not falter. In the glow of the lightsabers and whip, he could read an expression on her face: sheer rage. No doubt she had never fought Jedi like this before.

When at last she stood at the edge of the curving ramp, Obi-Wan made a bold move. He copied her action, leaping up to grab onto the conduit pipes overhead, then as the whip snaked and curled around him, drove into her with both feet.

She let out a surprised sound as she flew back, high above the ramp. She landed with a solid thud, then continued to skid down the ramp. She tried to stop her descent but the smooth stone was slippery. Her leg twisted underneath her and her head hit the stone wall with another sickening thud.

She lay still.

"Hurry, Padawan." Qui-Gon strode to the windows. Together with Obi-Wan he cut through the durasteel. It peeled back, leaving an opening big enough for them to get through.

Qui-Gon threw open the cubbyhole doors. Quickly, Obi-Wan helped Didi and Astri to the window ledge.

"You'll have to carry Astri," Qui-Gon told him. "I'll take Didi."

Without pausing to reply, Obi-Wan swept up the slender Astri in his arms. Qui-Gon picked up plump Didi with the same ease. Then they leaped into the air and landed softly on the ground below.

Qui-Gon jumped into the pilot seat of their cruiser. He fired up the engine. Red warning lights flashed, and there was no answering surge of power.

"She tampered with it," he said tersely. "Let's try ours," Didi suggested, already running toward his own cruiser.

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They followed, but Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan were not surprised when Didi's cruiser would not operate.

"She has to have transport nearby. If we – " Qui-Gon began, but his words were drowned out by a piercing, animal like cry.

For a moment, the light was blocked out as the bounty hunter threw herself out the window above. Her lips were curled back in a snarl.

She landed on one leg, whip flashing, and went straight for Obi-Wan.

Chapter Sixteen

Qui-Gon sprang forward to place himself between Obi-Wan and the bounty hunter as Didi and Astri leaped back to get out of his way. Obi-Wan used the opportunity to quickly scan the mountainside. It was crucial that they locate some form of transport. They had to get Didi and Astri away, even if he and Qui-Gon had to hold off the bounty hunter long enough for Didi and Astri to take off.

At first he couldn't distinguish anything. The snow was thick and blindingly white, dotted with boulders and crags. The sun bounced off the snow, hurting his eyes.

He had only seconds. Obi-Wan drew the Force around him, connecting him to everything he saw, from the craggy peaks and rocks to the fresh, dense snow.

He only saw a slight irregularity in the surface of the snow hundreds of meters below him.

Then he snapped his gaze back. It was a small cruiser. It was white, and it nestled in the snow, but he made out its outlines.

"Down there," Obi-Wan told Didi and Astri crisply as Qui-Gon's lightsaber tangled with the bounty hunter's whip. "Below that crag."

"I see it," Astri said.

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"Go," Obi-Wan urged, already spinning to cover Qui-Gon's flank. "Don't wait for us!"

Didi and Astri stepped off the landing platform onto the snow. They sank into the snow up to their knees. They pushed through, making their way slowly across the side of the mountain. Drifts alternated with patches of ice, but they pushed on.

The bounty hunter redoubled her efforts, suddenly launching an offensive that sent Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan back against the edge of the landing platform. She had grabbed Astri's blaster and let loose a stream of fire from one hand while the other expertly plied her whip.

Their lightsabers were a blur as they fought off the frenzied attack. She pushed her advantage, and they stepped off the landing platform into the snow.

Now their footing was uneven. Obi-Wan expected an attack, but the bounty hunter changed her tactics. Instead of pressing on, she turned her back and raced to the other end of the landing platform.

She poised on the edge and pressed a device in her utility belt. A thin material skin shot out from her shoulders and thighs, creating a cradle around her. She leaped into the air and came down on the snow on her back. Then she dug her heels into the snow and Obi-Wan could see that there were now spikes protruding from her boot soles.

"She is prepared, as usual," Qui-Gon said.

She pushed herself off and flew down the mountain in the improvised sled, gaining speed as she went.

"She's going to come at Didi and Astri from below," Obi-Wan said. "She'll be between them and the transport."

"Exactly. We must reach them first."

Didi and Astri had made some progress. Though the footing was treacherous, desperation had fueled their speed. They had not seen the bounty hunter yet.

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Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon hurried down the steep incline in their direction, carefully negotiating the ice and drifts. Obi-Wan glanced down the mountain at the bounty hunter. He could not imagine how she would manage to stop her descent. But as she slid, she unfurled her whip.

With an expert flick, the whip arced in the sky and looped around a craggy boulder. As the whip went taut, she dug her heels into the snow. Her treacherous slide was halted. She rolled to her side and sprang up, then detached the sled and began to race across the mountainside.

She made good progress as she moved across and up the face of the slope. Qui-Gon called out to Didi and Astri, alerting them to the fact that their enemy was now below them.

They hesitated, not knowing which way to go. Holding each other, they stood in the shadow of a crag. If they continued their descent, they would walk straight into the bounty hunter. The crag was too steep to climb.

Didi looked over at Qui-Gon helplessly.

"Stay there!" Qui-Gon shouted as he pushed through a drift. "We will come to you."

Obi-Wan wasn't worried. They were closer to Didi and Astri than the bounty hunter was. They would be able to reach them before she did, he had no doubt.

They were almost to the pair when the bounty hunter cracked her whip and sent it flying toward Astri. It lengthened farther than they had ever seen it go, growing longer and longer as it sailed through the air. It was not in laser mode, so it did not cut her. Instead, it whipped around her ankle. Didi desperately tried to hold on, but Astri was yanked off her feet and slid down the mountain, straight at the bounty hunter. At the same time, the bounty hunter reached down to her holster, withdrew a blaster, and shot Didi. He fell softly, silently, into the snow.

"She knows Astri has the data pad," Qui-Gon said tersely. "See to Didi. I have an idea."

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Qui-Gon activated his lightsaber again. He kept it in front of him, sweeping the snow with each stride to cut a narrow path through it. The ice melted in seconds, and he was able to hit firm ground. He made fast progress down the mountain. But not fast enough.

Obi-Wan used the same technique to get to Didi. He fervently hoped he was still alive. He fell to his knees by Didi's side and reached for the emergency medpac on his belt. He saw the spreading stain of blood on Didi's tunic and ripped it open. He quickly poured bacta into the wound.

Didi's eyes fluttered open. Despair pooled in his deep brown gaze. "Astri," he murmured.

Obi-Wan turned. Qui-Gon had not yet reached the bounty hunter, but Astri had. She lay at their enemy's feet. The bounty hunter had one booted foot on her chest. She reached down for the data pad, which had slipped out of Astri's tunic. Astri held the data pad in a deathgrip. The bounty hunter set the whip to laser mode and it glowed red.

Qui-Gon was too far away to stop her. "Astri," Didi moaned.

Obi-Wan summoned the Force. He felt the power in his muscles as he leaped from Didi's side onto the crag. He scrambled to the top in seconds. Then he bent his knees and gathered power for the spring. He leaped high in the air, so high that the bounty hunter sensed his presence in the sky and looked up, confused. She only had time to raise her arm back before Obi-Wan, in the same maneuver he had used in the house, came straight at her, feet first. He hit both of her shoulders with a mighty blow that sent her backward onto the snow. Obi-Wan landed in the snow, his feet planted on either side of her body, his lightsaber raised.

"Enough," he said.

She lay rigid, but he felt a flicker of movement in her right hand. He saw the glint of a vibroblade. Moving only her fingers, she flicked it with expert aim toward Astri.

STAR WARS: The Deadly Hunter

Obi-Wan's blow with the lightsaber was only a split second too late. It grazed the bounty hunter's fingers in a searing wound. At the same time he leaped backward, twisting in midair to try to catch the blade with his other hand. He used his Jedi reflexes to slow time down, allowing him to eye exactly where to grab it. The hilt thudded into his hand.

The bounty hunter stuck her wounded fingers in the snow for an instant. Her teeth sank into her lower lip.

The pain must have been terrible. She spoke for the first time. Her eyes blazed hatred at Obi-Wan. "You... will... pay."

Suddenly a lunge line shot out from her utility belt. It had a homing beacon to her cruiser, attaching itself to it and yanking her backward. Her body bounced across the ice. It must have been excruciatingly painful.

"Stay with them," Qui-Gon directed, and took off after her.

Obi-Wan watched as Qui-Gon gained on the bounty hunter. She scrambled into her cruiser. The engines fired and the loading ramp began to close as Qui-Gon gave a great leap and landed.

Horried, Obi-Wan saw the flash of blaster fire. Qui-Gon staggered.

"Master!" Obi-Wan screamed.

Qui-Gon fell backward into the bowels of the ship. The ramp retracted. The ship rose in the air and shot away into the upper atmosphere.

Obi-Wan could hear as if for the first time the wind whispering along the surface of the snow. Astri raggedly breathed behind him. The echo of his own anguished cry reverberated off the mountain as he watched the ship disappear.

Had Qui-Gon been captured by the bounty hunter, or had he captured her? Was he mortally wounded? Was he alive – or dead?

The anguish of not knowing made Obi-Wan want to crash to his knees. But there were wounded he had to care for. Qui-Gon had told him to stay.

"Don't lose heart, Qui-Gon," he whispered. "I'll find you. Hold on."

Jude Watson

He would find a way to bring back his Master.

Book Twelve
The Evil Experiment

Chapter One

He heard sound, but it was only a rush of white noise. His eyes were open, but he could only see vapor. He was wet, but he was not in water. Since he was not able to trust his sight or hearing, Qui-Gon Jinn decided to focus on the pain.

He tracked its location and measured its quality. It was on the left side of his chest, above his heart, and ran up to his shoulder. It wasn't a white-hot pain, but a steady burning ache, as deep as muscle and bone.

It told him he was alive.

He tried to move his right arm. The slight contraction of muscle, the effort required, seemed enormous. He hit something smooth with his fingers. He followed it slowly, tracing it up, then down. He moved his other arm and reached out his hand. Again, he met a solid wall. It was all around him. He realized that he was trapped.

A jolt of panic raced through him as he realized that he did not remember why he was here. Qui-Gon allowed it to exist and then watched it go. He breathed deeply. He was a Jedi Knight. His lightsaber was gone as well as his utility belt, but he still had the Force.

He was not alone.

Jude Watson

As he breathed, Qui-Gon brought his mind to stillness. He told himself that his memory would return. He would not strain for it. He did not need it to live in the present moment.

He concentrated on his surroundings. Slowly he realized that he was in a transparent chamber. The reason he felt dizzy and strange was that he hung suspended, upside down. A cloudy gas surrounded him. Somehow it kept him floating in the tank. He could not see clearly through the vapor to the outside. He shifted, hoping to change position, and pain shot down his shoulder to his side. Blaster wounds were tricky. You thought the flesh was knitting, and then your wound told you otherwise if you tried too much, too soon...

Blaster wound.

Memories flooded back.

He had been on a mountainside with his Padawan, Obi-Wan Kenobi. They were trying to protect his friend Didi Oddo and Didi's daughter, Astri. The bounty hunter had shot Didi, and he had fallen —

Didi!

— and Obi-Wan had leaped an astonishing distance to knock the bounty hunter down. The bounty hunter had tried one last desperate maneuver, throwing a knife at Astri. His Padawan had caught it in midair. Qui-Gon remembered the pride he felt when he saw the skill of his Padawan, how Obi-Wan had timed his move and called on the Force in order to catch the deadly spinning weapon by the hilt, not the blade.

The bounty hunter had known she was defeated then. She had activated a cable line, which launched her down the mountain toward her craft. Qui-Gon had followed. He had just made it onto the launching ramp when she shot him. He remembered his surprise at the white heat in his chest, remembered falling forward into the ship and the ramp closing after him. He thought he could still hear Obi-Wan's cry.

He had left his Padawan on a remote planet with a wounded Didi — *let him be wounded, not dead* — and a young girl.

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Qui-Gon moved again, and his wound screamed fire.

A female voice suddenly came to him, amplified within the tank.

"You might be experiencing some pain. It's from the chest wound. It has been treated. You will survive."

"Who are you?" Qui-Gon asked.

"You are a subject of scientific experimentation," the voice went on pleasantly. "You will not be hurt, only studied."

"What do you mean, I won't be hurt? I'm confined!" Qui-Gon protested.

"You will be treated well."

"I am here against my will! Who are you? Where am I?"

The voice did not answer. Instead, an apparatus shot into the chamber. At the end was a syringe. Qui-Gon tried to twist away, but he had nowhere to move. A needle pricked him in the neck. He watched his blood move down the transparent tube. The syringe retracted. Slowly, his body revolved until he was right-side up again.

Dizziness swamped him, but he knew it would pass. He gathered his strength, waiting out the spell.

As soon as he felt strong, he gritted his teeth against the pain and lashed out with both feet. He could not get enough leverage, and he bounced off the transparent material. He struck out with a balled fist, but got no response. The material did not bend. It did not even move a millimeter.

"Now, is that suitable behavior?" the voice chided. "You are not a child."

"I am a Jedi Knight!" Qui-Gon shouted.

"Precisely. And your life is one of service. Isn't that so?" The voice did not wait for him to respond. "Now you will be of service to the galaxy. Much more so than when you dash from world to world, waving that lightsaber around. I'm doing you a favor. You get to truly prove your commitment – how many Jedi can say the same? So relax. Let's see some of that famous Jedi meditation."

Jude Watson

The note of dry amusement was suddenly familiar to Qui-Gon. Of course! As his memory returned, so did his suspicions.

His captor was Jenna Zan Arbor.

The brilliant scientist who appeared so perfect on the surface. The researcher who had saved whole populations from famine and plague. Yet somehow he had suspected that she was behind the plot to kill Didi. He was glad to see that his instincts had been correct.

Unfortunately, he was now her prisoner.

And he had not confided his suspicions to Obi-Wan. The boy would not know where to look, whom to suspect.

"Jenna Zan Arbor, you will not be able to hide from the Jedi," he said, matching her coolness with his own.

"Ah, so you know who I am. I'm impressed. What a specimen! It merely proves my choice is correct. I have researched you, Qui-Gon Jinn. I have found that you are an esteemed Jedi Knight, strong in the Force. You are perfect for my needs."

"And what are your needs?" Qui-Gon asked.

He heard her dry, humorless laugh. "All in good time, Qui-Gon. Just say good-bye to the life you knew. You are mine now."

Chapter Two

Obi-Wan Kenobi stared at the floor. It was a change. For hours, he had been staring at the wall.

He was in the Jedi Temple med center. With one look, Obi-Wan knew Didi needed the best care in the galaxy. He and Astri had brought Didi in, talking to him constantly during the journey, even though he had long ago lapsed into unconsciousness.

The Jedi medics and healers had rushed Didi into an interior room. They had only come out to tell Obi-Wan and Astri that Didi was still alive, and that they were hopeful.

Over the long night, Bant had sat by his side, then Garen, his best friends at the Temple. Bant did not speak, but occasionally would slip her slender hand into his. All night they had sat, waiting for news. At last he had sent his friends away to eat breakfast. He could not eat. He could not sleep.

Didi struggled for life in the next room. What about Qui-Gon? Was his Master alive or dead?

He is alive, Obi-Wan told himself fiercely. *He is alive because he must be alive.*

He had seen the blaster fire hit Qui-Gon in the chest near the heart. He had seen him stagger and fall back. But Qui-Gon had reserves of strength that were astonishing. Even if he were the

Jude Watson

bounty hunter's captive, he would manage to stay alive until Obi-Wan could find him. The bounty hunter would not leave him to die.

He told himself this, over and over. But when he remembered her impassive face, her ruthlessness in battle, Obi-Wan felt despair.

And still I sit here. Waiting.

He had briefed Yoda and Tahl, the Jedi Knight who was coordinating the search for Qui-Gon. He had told them everything he knew. But he could not tell them where the bounty hunter was headed. They did not know who had hired her to track down Didi. They did not know why. They did not even know her name. There were too many questions. And Qui-Gon's life hung in the balance.

Yoda had assigned several Jedi teams to investigate Qui-Gon's disappearance. Tahl was trying to crack the code of Jenna Zan Arbor's datapad, as well as look for clues that might lead to the identity and whereabouts of the mysterious bounty hunter. Everything that could possibly be done was being done. All the resources of the Jedi were turned toward finding Qui-Gon. Except for Obi-Wan. He could only sit.

"Have you memorized the floor yet?"

Astri's voice broke into his thoughts. She gave him a half smile. "I have. There are twenty-seven squares of stone between here and the wall."

"It can't be much longer," Obi-Wan said.

She sighed and leaned forward on her knees, clasping her hands together. Astri was tall and slender, with midnight-black hair that hung in curls to the middle of her back. She was older than Obi-Wan and had run Didi's Café with her father. He did not know Astri well, but he had come to know that she did not like to show weakness or affection. Having her father shot before her eyes had devastated her. Trying to conceal her shock and despair was defeating her.

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"I never knew my birth parents," Astri said as she stared down at the floor. "Someone left me in Didi's Café. He took me in."

"I didn't know that," Obi-Wan said.

"I think whoever left me there must have cared about me somewhat," Astri went on softly. "They chose Didi to be my father. They knew he wouldn't give me away to be placed by the government. They knew his heart would melt at the sight of a baby. And it did. I was lucky."

"Yes, I can see that," Obi-Wan said. "Sometimes the home you find is the one you are meant to have." It was how he felt about the Temple. And Qui-Gon.

She turned to look at him, sorrow in her dark eyes. "I'm sure Qui-Gon will be all right. He's so strong. I've known him all my life, Obi-Wan. I have seen how strong he is."

Obi-Wan nodded. If Qui-Gon were dead, he would know it. He would feel it.

"I know you want to find him. Thank you for staying here with me."

"I wouldn't know where to start," Obi-Wan confessed. "We don't know why the bounty hunter was hired."

"We know she tried to steal that datapad," Astri said. "So we know there is information on it that is valuable to someone. And we know that datapad belonged to Jenna Zan Arbor. Fligh stole it from her."

"But he also stole Senator S'orn's datapad," Obi-Wan pointed out. "So the connection to the bounty hunter could lie there. Your friend Fligh is dead and cannot give us answers. And even if we did find out who hired the bounty hunter, we still don't know where she would take Qui-Gon."

Astri nodded. "But you will find him," she said. "The Jedi can do anything."

She stood, wincing as she did so. Astri had a wrenched shoulder, as well as bumps and bruises from being dragged down the mountainside, a prisoner of the bounty hunter's whip.

Jude Watson

"Are you all right?" Obi-Wan asked. "The medic could give you something for the pain."

"No, I want to stay alert. What about you?" Astri asked Obi-Wan. "How is your leg?"

Obi-Wan felt the bandage on his thigh. His leg had been sliced by the spiking of the bounty hunter's whip. The wound had been bathed in a bacta tank. It would heal. Already the pain was ebbing.

And Qui-Gon? Have his wounds been attended to?

Astri prowled around the small waiting room. It was designed for comfort and calm, in colors of pale blue and white. The seating areas were grouped for both privacy and intimacy.

Astri looked out at the view of Coruscant. "I am so grateful to the Jedi. The healers and medics have been so good. I just wish they were *faster*."

The door to the inner treatment rooms opened. The Jedi healer, Winna Di Yuni, came toward them, dressed in the light blue tunic of a medic. Obi-Wan had been glad when Winna had taken over Didi's care. She was an elder Jedi, tall and strong, with a gentle manner. She was renowned for her great skill as a diagnostician. She had a vast knowledge of all the diseases in the galaxy.

Now Obi-Wan's heart beat faster when he saw the look on Winna's face. He knew in a sudden flash that she was not bringing good news. He stood, and Astri quickly crossed to his side.

Winna looked at Astri kindly and gestured for them to take a seat. She sat opposite them. "We have done all we can for your father," she said. "It is up to Didi now. His life energy is very low. He himself must find the strength to fight."

Obi-Wan saw Astri swallow. "His wounds are bad?" he asked.

Winna nodded. "Very bad, I'm afraid. But that is not the only problem. Infection has set in, an infection that we cannot identify. We are searching all our data banks. I did not want to

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come out here until we found out what infection this is, but you need to know what is happening."

"I don't understand," Astri said. "You are the best healers in the galaxy. If you don't know what is wrong with Didi, who will know?"

"We do not know everything," Winna said gently. "The galaxy is a very large place. Infections and diseases pop up everywhere, new ones all the time. I have no doubt that we will locate the source of this one. But it may take time."

"Didi doesn't have time," Astri said, gripping her hands together. "That is what you mean."

"Do not look for the worst thing," Winna said. "Think of the best thing. We will identify this infection and treat it."

Astri bit her lip. "Can I see him?"

"Yes, of course. He is not conscious. But he might feel your presence. Come with me."

Astri followed Winna. She looked as though she were sleepwalking. Obi-Wan felt stunned as well. Didi was larger than life. He had expected the healers to come out with good news any second.

Instead, there was only more waiting...

The door to the main hallway opened. Tahl walked in with Yoda at her side.

"How is Didi?" Yoda asked. "Heard we did that news there is."

"He has an infection that they cannot identify," Obi-Wan said. "Winna tried to reassure Astri, but I can see that she is worried."

"Do her best, she will. A great amount, that is." Yoda pressed a button and one of the seating cushions lowered. They were adjustable for the many species in the Jedi Temple. He lowered himself onto the cushion, then leaned on his staff. "And you, Obi-Wan? No sleep you've had, I fear."

"I can't sleep until I know Qui-Gon is safe," Obi-Wan said. "Is there any news?"

Jude Watson

Tahl's sightless green-and-gold striped eyes were filled with frustration. She shook her head, her lips tightening. "I've got every contact working, Obi-Wan," she told him. "Giett has returned from his long mission and is back on the Council, so Ki-Adi-Mundi is helping with the galactic search. We could not ask for a better analyst."

Obi-Wan nodded. Ki-Adi-Mundi had stood in for Giett on the Jedi Council for a time. With his binary brain, he was able to sift through an extraordinary amount of information and analyze it.

"We don't have anything on the bounty hunter," Tahl continued. "She has no known friends or comrades. Those who have hired her refuse to talk, even to us. They're scared of retaliation. But we're working on it."

"What about Jenna Zan Arbor's datapad?" Obi-Wan asked. "There must be something on it that somebody wants."

"We can't crack the code," Tahl said. "Most scientists encode their data – it doesn't mean that she is connected to the bounty hunter or Qui-Gon's disappearance. But just in case, we don't want to alert her that we're on her trail. We have to explore all options until we find the right way to proceed. I won't rest until we find him, Obi-Wan."

"I know," Obi-Wan told her. Tahl was just as close to Qui-Gon. They had gone through Temple training together.

"Teams we have all over the Duneeden system, Obi-Wan," Yoda told him. "Find we will a trace of the bounty hunter's ship."

"We know the ship was equipped with a hyperdrive," Tahl said worriedly. "There's a good chance she didn't remain in the Duneeden system at all. But we're going to check out every lead."

"News I have of one Jedi team," Yoda told them. "Dispatched they were to Zan Arbor's lab on her home planet of Ventrux. Find we did that the lab has been closed down. Dismissed the workers were, and paid off."

A spark lit Tahl's eyes. "Well, at least that's something. Jenna Zan Arbor has to be involved. We've got to crack that code!"

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Yoda nodded. "Think we do that she has another base of operations," he said. "Searching for it, we are." He turned to Obi-Wan. "A difficult time for calm it is. Yet calm you must find. When news comes, go with a steady heart you must. Direction you need. Direction we will find."

Obi-Wan's heart was far from steady. But Yoda was right. He must be resolute, and resolution only came with calm.

The door to the inner chamber slid open. Winna came forward quickly.

"Didi's infection has been identified. The blaster fire must have been tainted with a solution to trigger infection."

"Do you have a cure?" Obi-Wan asked.

Winna nodded. "The treatment has been discovered. It is an antitoxin. But I have bad news. The lab that sells it has been shut down. There are no stockpiles that we can find. This lab was the only source in the galaxy."

Obi-Wan glanced at Tahl. By the look on her face, he knew she was thinking the same thing. Yoda nodded slowly.

"What's the name of the lab?" Obi-Wan asked. "Arbor Industries," Winna replied.

It was the answer Obi-Wan had expected to hear.

Chapter Three

He was getting weaker, not stronger. Qui-Gon felt his body float. He wanted to give himself up to the sensation, bob in the oddly pleasant vapor, let it lull him into long sleeps. Even in his worst illness, he had never felt so weak.

Was she doing something to keep him weak? Blood was extracted regularly, but that still did not account for his fatigue.

Isolated from the world, from other living creatures, he knew the Force still worked around him. He closed his eyes and reached out to it. He would gather it around him like a shield. Qui-Gon felt the Force move inside the chamber. He concentrated harder...

Through the veil of vapor, indicator lights outside his chamber glowed. Dimly, he heard a sensor ring shrilly and the sound of hurrying footsteps. Then Zan Arbor's amplified voice again:

"You just accessed the Force. Good. Don't be afraid to do so."

"How did you know?" Qui-Gon asked. The question was out of his mouth before he had a chance to think. His surprise had triggered it.

"I am monitoring your body functions. When you access the Force, your body temperature drops. Your heartbeat slows. So

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strange. Once I thought the Force would have the opposite effect. But it works mysteriously. That's why it is so interesting to study."

So she was studying the Force. Qui-Gon turned this new fact over in his mind. The Force could not be measured or manufactured. But if a scientist of Jenna Zan Arbor's brilliance was studying it, it was possible she could discover things she should not know. He must not underestimate her intelligence.

Which meant he could not use the Force to heal himself.

"Why are you so interested in the Force?" he asked.

"Ah, we are full of questions today," she murmured.

"There is not much else to do in here," Qui-Gon pointed out.

"What about your famous Jedi meditation? That should pass the time."

"Even meditation has its limits," Qui-Gon said dryly.

He heard a low laugh. "Why shouldn't I study the Force? Why should the Jedi be the only ones to study it?"

Qui-Gon thought before answering. He needed to keep her talking. He needed to appear to be interested in her studies.

"That is a good point," he said. "We believe the Force connects us all."

"That is exactly my point!" Zan Arbor said excitedly. "The Jedi should welcome my interest."

"How do you know they do not?" Qui-Gon asked. "You haven't asked us."

"I don't need your permission," she snapped.

He was losing her. "I didn't mean that," he said. "You are a brilliant researcher. You might want to share your findings with the galaxy."

"When I am ready," she said. "But not until then."

"And what are you looking for?"

She did not answer for a moment, and he was afraid the conversation was over. Then she said, "My colleagues are fools."

Qui-Gon waited. He did not want to seem too eager. Something told him that Jenna Zan Arbor wanted to talk.

Jude Watson

"You've traveled. You must have seen that the galaxy is full of fools."

"I have seen that many beings do not trust their eyes, their minds, or their hearts," Qui-Gon said.

"Exactly! So you see what I have to deal with," Jenna Zan Arbor said, her voice warming. "I have just come from a conference at the Senate. My colleagues are chasing dreams, not ideas. New ways to make starships go faster. New engines, new fuels, new hyperdrives. They try to find ways to make weapons more powerful, more effective. They look for new sources of power. Faster. Bigger. Better. That is what they chase. They ignore the most powerful energy in the galaxy. The Force is far more important than any of these. With the Force, you can move *minds*. That is much more important than ships!"

"I would agree with that," Qui-Gon said.

"How ironic," Zan Arbor said. "Only a Jedi would understand. And yet only the Jedi can be my best subjects. The others... even those who had the Force, who were, as you call them, Force-sensitive... they did not know what they had. They could not control it. It is hard to measure something that will not be controlled. That was the flaw in my experiments."

Qui-Gon had a sudden notion that chilled him. Was Zan Arbor keeping him in a condition of weakness so that he would use the Force to heal himself?

He could do nothing in this chamber. He would never escape if he didn't get out, even for a short time.

Perhaps he could form some sort of bond with his captor.

"I will make a deal with you," he said.

"I hardly think you are in a position to offer deals," Jenna Zan Arbor said, amused.

"I think I am," Qui-Gon returned quietly. "I have something you want. That puts me exactly in that position."

There was a pause. "What do you want?"

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"I want to be let out of this chamber for two hours a day," Qui-Gon said. "If you do this, I will use the Force to heal myself. If you do not, I will not access it."

"You will die," she warned.

"Yes," Qui-Gon replied calmly. "As a Jedi, I am prepared for death. It does not frighten me."

"I do not make deals!" Zan Arbor cried shrilly. "*I* am the leader here! *I* make the decisions!"

He did not answer. He closed his eyes. He was gambling that she would not refuse him. He sensed the fever in her, the compulsion to follow through on her experiments. She would give in.

"All right," she snapped. "But not two hours. One hour. That's all. Do we have a deal?"

"We have a deal," Qui-Gon answered. He had expected her to counter with one hour. It was not a problem. One hour would have to be enough.

Chapter Four

Yoda, Tahl, and Obi-Wan were silent for a long moment. The news that Jenna Zan Arbor controlled access to Didi's antitoxin disturbed them.

"It's very strange," Winna continued. "Not only is Arbor Industries closed, but there is no other source we can find anywhere. There must be some mistake, something we haven't thought to check. This infection is very rare, but still, Arbor Industries should have allowed other labs to stock the antitoxin. This is an astonishing breach of ethics. They left no word when they'll reopen, or where -"

"Something you should know, there is," Yoda interrupted. "Under suspicion by the Jedi, Jenna Zan Arbor is."

"She could be involved in Qui-Gon Jinn's disappearance," Tahl said.

"Not to mention murder," Obi-Wan added.

Winna's frown grew deeper as shock slowly registered on her face. "You mean that Zan Arbor has *deliberately* deprived the galaxy of her medicines?"

"I think it a very great possibility," Tahl said. Winna's expression was grim. "My patient will die without that antitoxin."

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"I don't understand." Astri had come up behind them so quietly they had not heard her. "You say that Jenna Zan Arbor has the medicine that my father needs, and you can't find her?"

"I am afraid that is the case," Winna said.

Obi-Wan went to Astri. He hovered by her side, uncertain of what to say or do. "You mustn't lose hope," he said.

She nodded, her mouth tightening. He saw her shoulders shaking. She was trying not to cry aloud.

"Obi-Wan is right," Winna said. "The antitoxin must be held somewhere in the galaxy. We will find it, Astri."

"I know you will do everything you can." "Our good friend Didi is, Astri," Yoda told her. "Take good care of him, we will."

"You are very kind." Astri turned and walked toward the window. She stared out blankly. "She has lost hope," Tahl murmured.

"Bad news, it was," Yoda said. "Hard to absorb."

"I'd better get back," Winna said tersely, and hurried off.

"Go to Astri, you should," Yoda told Obi-Wan. "Her friend you are. Console her, you must. Hope must not die while Didi lives."

But Astri wasn't really his friend. He'd just met her. And he wasn't very good at consolation. If only Qui-Gon were here!

Yoda and Tahl left, and Obi-Wan went to stand awkwardly by Astri's side.

"He's going to die," she said. "And I will be alone."

"We cannot lose hope," Obi-Wan said. "The Jedi are capable of extraordinary things. We will find the antitoxin or Jenna Zan Arbor."

"I am certain that you will," Astri said. "But will Didi still be alive? He looks so small, Obi-Wan. His spirit filled him. Now he's so weak. .."

"He is not weak," Obi-Wan said. "He had one of the strongest spirits I've ever seen. It is still there, his strength."

"I thought I had troubles once," Astri said slowly. "Running a business wasn't easy. But now I know despair for the first time."

Jude Watson

Even if Didi survives, we have lost everything. The café has been closed by our landlord. We owe him credits we cannot pay. Even as I sit by Didi's bedside, begging him to live, I wonder what he will return to. And it's my fault. I spent all our savings on improvements for the café. We have nothing."

Obi-Wan did not have to wonder what Qui-Gon would say. "You have each other."

"You're right, Obi-Wan. I'm feeling sorry for myself." Astri rubbed her forehead. "It's just that I'm so tired."

"Why don't you rest here?" Obi-Wan suggested, indicating the seating area. "You wouldn't have to go to the sleeping quarters. I will make sure you won't be disturbed, unless... unless Didi awakens."

Astri sank onto the cushions and laid her head down. "Maybe just an hour," she said as her eyes closed.

Obi-Wan decided he would stay until he was sure she was asleep. His nerves were jumping. He was anxious to check with Tahl and the Jedi code breakers. He wanted to be present when they cracked the datapad.

He reached into his tunic to remove the Force-sensitive river stone that Qui-Gon had given him. He often found comfort in turning the smooth stone around in his hand. It made him feel closer to Qui-Gon.

A crackle alerted him that there was something else in his inner pocket. Obi-Wan took it out. It was a durasheet. On it, Jenna Zan Arbor had written the names of the guests she had invited to Didi's Café. The names were already beginning to fade.

Obi-Wan thought back to only a few days before. Qui-Gon had asked her to write out the information when they'd visited her at her hotel.

Qui-Gon never did anything without a reason. Obi-Wan frowned, thinking hard. They had gone to see Zan Arbor because they had discovered that she had learned about Didi's Café from Didi's friend Fligh. Fligh had stolen the datapad of both Senator S'orn and Zan Arbor. Later he had been found dead, his body

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drained of blood. At that point, they did not know if Zan Arbor was involved. They were just following a thread.

In other words, Zan Arbor hadn't been a suspect. So why had Qui-Gon asked for this list?

Back then, Obi-Wan thought that the Outlaw Tech gang had hired the bounty hunter. But Qui-Gon must have had his doubts. Had he been trying to link the bounty hunter to Zan Arbor?

They had never solved the mystery of how the bounty hunter had been able to break into Didi's Café after Zan Arbor's guests had left. They knew the café had been locked up tight, every door and window bolted.

Could Qui-Gon have wondered if one of the guests had stayed behind? Astri might not have noticed in the confusion of departure.

And the bounty hunter was a master of disguise...

Obi-Wan looked over at Astri. She was sleeping peacefully. He could leave her for a short time.

He crossed to a small desk in the corner. Quickly, he copied the fading names onto a fresh durasheet and tossed the old one in the trash container.

He headed out the door. It wasn't much to go on, but it was a direction.

Chapter Five

Yamele Polidor

Nontal Quincu

Aleck W'a Ni Odus

Dobei Eranusite

B'Zun Mai Reesa On Von Taub

Obi-Wan took an air taxi to the Official Committee Liaison Office at the Senate. This office handled the transportation and residence needs of the many committees from around the galaxy that came to petition the Senate. Since it was a Jedi request, he was given the home-worlds and contact information of each being on the list.

Quickly, Obi-Wan scanned it. Only three of the guests were still staying on Coruscant. The others had returned to their homeworlds. He would start here. If he found nothing, he would move on. If he had to travel to the Outer Rim for a clue, he would do it.

Yamele Polidor and Von Taub still had business with the Senate and were staying in a guesthouse nearby. Obi-Wan went there first. He found them together in the sitting room, going over the record of the meeting they had attended that day.

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Obi-Wan explained that he was on a Jedi mission to discover who had broken into Didi's Café after their group had left.

Yamele Polidor was a petite Rindian with pointed ears and two eight-fingered hands. She nodded politely at Obi-Wan. "Of course I will be glad to help."

The Corweillian Von Taub nodded. "As will I." "Did anyone come into the café while you were there?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Just the members of our own party," Yamele Polidor answered in the low, singsong manner of a Rindian.

"Did you notice anyone on the street outside?"

Von Taub shook his head. "We left, and the owner of the café, a young woman, locked the door after us. Jenna Zan Arbor was very upset with the service and food. I didn't think it was that bad, myself." He smiled. "Maybe I'm more used to disorganization. But Jenna is a scientist who can't tolerate disorder."

"Do you know the other names on this list well?" Obi-Wan asked. He handed the list to them.

Yamele Polidor ran one of her long fingers down the list. "I know all of these scientists personally, except for Dobei Eranusite and Reesa On."

"I know Dobei quite well," Von Taub said. "Reesa On was a stranger to me as well."

"Did anyone know her?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Jenna Zan Arbor," Yamele Polidor answered.

"Yes, they worked on a research project together," Von Taub added. "Jenna was very complimentary about her skills as a scientist. None of the rest of us knew her."

Obi-Wan kept his voice steady despite his rising excitement. "Do you remember what she looked like?"

"Not really," Yamele Polidor said with a shrug. "Tall, maybe? She was humanoid. That, I remember."

"Very striking," Von Taub said. "She wore a silk turban and a lovely septsilk robe."

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Obi-Wan realized he had seen her himself. He had a vague memory of a woman in a jeweled turban. He pushed his urgency away and left his mind open, let the memory come as it would, as he had been taught. The information he sought would come to him.

He and Qui-Gon had been talking to Astri when the guests arrived. He remembered the look of distaste on Jenna Zan Arbor's face. And one tall woman had gathered her rich robe around her as if it would get dirty from touching a chair or the floor. She had very strong hands...

It had been her. The bounty hunter.

He was sure of it. And now he had a name.

"One last question," Obi-Wan said. "Do you know if Zan Arbor has more than one lab? I know that her main lab is on Ventrux."

Both the scientists looked puzzled. "But why would she need another lab?" Von Taub asked.

"I have never heard such a thing," Yamele Polidor added.

"Thank you for your help," he said, rising and bowing. He hurried outside and immediately summoned Tahl on his comlink.

"We could have a lead," he said. "I think the bounty hunter posed as a scientist named Reesa On. Most likely she disguised herself in order to steal the datapad back from Didi and Astri. She would have if Qui-Gon and I hadn't returned and surprised her. The Senate still lists her as being on Coruscant. She's supposed to inform them when she returns to her home-world. I have the address."

"Don't go alone," Tahl warned. "Wait, and I'll send a team to you."

"I can't wait," Obi-Wan argued. "She's listed at a lodging only a short distance from here. Let me at least see if she's there."

"Do not engage her in battle or even show yourself," Tahl warned. "She could lead us to Qui-Gon."

"I won't," Obi-Wan promised. "I'll just keep her under surveillance."

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"I'll see what I can discover from here," Tahl told him. "Good work, Obi-Wan."

Obi-Wan cut the communication and headed down the walkway that led to Vertex, the street that was listed as Reesa On's address. He drew his robe around him and lifted his hood to cover his face. He must follow Tahl's advice. He knew Tahl was just as anxious as he was to find Qui-Gon. If she urged caution, it was only because being careful would bring them to Qui-Gon faster.

The inn where Reesa On was staying was similar to the one he had left. Many small guesthouses existed around the Senate to cater to wealthy guests with Senate business that required long stays. It was a far cry from the shabby, decrepit inn where he'd had his first confrontation with the bounty hunter.

And it had security. Guests used swipe cards to enter. All others had to be announced.

He loitered outside the building, wondering what to do. Most likely he would not be lucky enough to see her enter or leave. And would he recognize her even if she did? She had impersonated an old man, a wealthy scientist, and a young boy parking speeders at a grand hotel. Her powers of transformation were incredible.

The door to the house slid open, and someone stood on the threshold. Concealed behind a row of speeders, Obi-Wan looked carefully. A Rodian stood for a moment as if to test the weather. Even a master of disguise could not impersonate a Rodian. This one was bulky and short, with green skin and the usual ridge of spines along his skull. No, this was not the bounty hunter.

Quickly, Obi-Wan stood and crossed the walkway. He headed up the ramp and nodded at the Rodian, then walked through the open door. It slid shut behind him.

The guesthouse was operated by automation. He glanced around quickly at the terminals set in the walls. Here guests used their cards to pick up messages. He spied a keyboard and quickly typed in *Reesa On*.

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ROOM 1289

PLEASE SWIPE SECURITY CARD FOR MESSAGE
ACCESS

Obi-Wan took the turbolift to the twelfth floor. He moved quickly down the hall and stood in front of Room 1289. He pressed his ear to the door, every sense alert. Listening was a Jedi skill that was honed in exercises during Temple training.

He heard the soft whisper of fabric. Its regular movement told him that it was just a curtain stirring with a breeze. He could not hear footsteps or even breathing.

What now? Obi-Wan knew that it would not be the last time he would ask himself that question. Without Qui-Gon, he was unsure of every step.

Obi-Wan was concentrating so hard on the sounds behind the door that he heard the opening of the turbolift just a second too late. He felt a surge in the Force, warning him an instant before blaster fire slammed into the door over his head.

Chapter Six

Obi-Wan ducked and rolled, reaching for his lightsaber at the same time. It was activated and ready for the next round of fire even as he leaped in the air toward his assailant.

"Obi-Wan, no!" Astri screamed.

She fell backward, the blaster flying from her grasp. Her feet flew up, barely missing the blade of the lightsaber. Obi-Wan quickly deactivated it. She landed with a *thump* and a cry that must have been heard by every guest on the floor.

"What are you doing here?" he hissed.

"What are you doing here?" she shouted at the same time.

Obi-Wan silenced her with a gesture and pointed to Reesa On's door. Astri stood, straightening her tunic.

"She's not there. I already checked the room." "What?"

Down the hallway, a door slid open a few centimeters, and two orange eyes peered out at them.

"Come on," Obi-Wan muttered. "We can't talk here."

He grabbed Astri's blaster and tucked it into his utility belt. He didn't speak while they were in the turbolift. Astri stole a few glances at him. She opened her mouth once or twice, but decided to stay silent.

He waited until they had left the guesthouse and had walked a short distance from it. He struggled to gather his patience. He

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did not want to show his anger. But he did not have Qui-Gon's gift for serenity.

"What were you doing there?" he demanded. "You could have ruined everything!"

"I thought you would need help -"

"You're a cook, not a Jedi!" Obi-Wan burst out. "How did you find me, anyway? Did you follow me?"

"I read that durasheet you left," Astri said. "I recognized the names. They were the guests at Jenna's dinner party at our café. And you think the bounty hunter was one of them."

Obi-Wan stared at her in disbelief. "So how did you find out where Reesa On was staying? And how did you find out that the bounty hunter is Reesa On? Did you go to the Senate Liaison Office, too? That could tip her off!"

Astri waved her hand. "I don't have to go through official channels. I'm Didi's daughter, remember? Everyone who comes to the Senate doesn't just go through a security check. They go through a *criminal* check."

"You mean they're scanned for outstanding warrants?" Obi-Wan asked.

She grinned as she sidestepped a group of tourists. "No, they're checked out *by* criminals. Nanno L'a and his gang keep tabs on all Senate petitioners and commission members who visit from other worlds. You never know who might have something worth stealing. So I talked to Nanno. He'd do anything for Didi. He gave me the rundown on the names on the list. His gang had copies of the textdocs on each of them. The only one who came up blank was Reesa On. She had a couple of ID facts in her textdoc, but no record of financial transactions. For someone with plenty of wealth, that seemed odd. So I figured Reesa On was a false identity. Nan no knew where Reesa On was staying. So I went there."

"How do you know she wasn't in her room?" Obi-Wan asked. He felt a little irritated that Astri was able to focus on Reesa On quicker than he had.

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"These guesthouses all use the nearby cafés and restaurants for food service," Astri explained. "I went to the Galaxy Grill down the street and asked my friend Endami for the service code. Then I pretended to have a meal delivery and punched in the code." She shrugged. "That got me inside. The service code will also tell you who is staying in what room. It was easy."

Easy! "So did you break into her room?" Obi-Wan asked irritably.

"I knocked and said I had a food delivery," Astri said. "No one answered, so I opened the door."

"But it was locked."

Astri smiled. "I learned how to bypass a basic security lock when I was seven, Obi-Wan. My guess is she's not coming back. There was a travel bag there, but it's filled with things that are supposed to make you *think* someone is there."

"If that makes sense, I'd sure like to hear why," Obi-Wan grumbled.

"It's got a new personal care kit with soap and bath items, but they haven't been used. A couple of fresh tunics and sleepwear that haven't been worn. My guess is that the bounty hunter never even stayed there at all – she just paid up for her two week minimum so that she'd have an official address."

Astri was probably right, Obi-Wan thought.

They were no closer to finding Reesa On's true identity. In frustration, he turned away and started to walk.

"Where are we going?" Astri asked.

"*You* are going back to the Temple," Obi-Wan said. "I'm trying to find Qui-Gon. This is Jedi business."

"This is *my* business." Astri stopped short, forcing Obi-Wan to stop, too. "Didi isn't waking up, Obi-Wan," she said, her dark eyes serious. "Not without that antitoxin. You and I both know that. And Reesa On is our first clue to where Jenna Zan Arbor is. You think she is holding Qui-Gon, right?"

Obi-Wan nodded reluctantly.

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"So I have just as much reason to find Reesa On as you do. The bounty hunter could lead us to Zan Arbor. And I have another reason. Nanno told me that because of Fligh's murder and Qui-Gon's disappearance, a warrant has been issued for the bounty hunter's arrest by the Coruscant security forces. There's a reward, too. Don't you see?" Astri tossed the curls out of her eyes impatiently. "This is the only thing I can do for Didi. I can find the antitoxin *and* get us a new stake. All I have to do is find Reesa On."

He shook his head. "It's too dangerous." "I can help you, Obi-Wan."

"What are you going to do, cook us out of danger?" Obi-Wan asked skeptically.

"There are other things I can do!" Astri protested. "Do I have to point out that I found Reesa On quicker than you did? You have to admit I have *some* skills."

"Not with a blaster," Obi-Wan muttered. He thought for a moment. He knew Astri well enough to guess that if he didn't include her, she would try to find the bounty hunter on her own. She would be safer with him.

"We can team up, but I need a couple of conditions," he said. "First of all, you don't use a blaster."

"But I need protection," Astri protested. "And I'm getting better at aiming."

Obi-Wan winced. "Sure. You came within *five* centimeters of killing me instead of six. I'll make a deal with you. We have to wait until Tahl comes up with information about Reesa On. I'll go back to the Temple with you and choose a new weapon. We'll see how you do with a vibroblade. You should have some kind of protection, I suppose."

"What's the other condition?" Astri asked.

"If things get dangerous, I'm going to ask you to return to the Temple," Obi-Wan said. "A pile of credits isn't going to help Didi if you're dead."

Astri hesitated.

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"I know you think I have no right to tell you what to do," Obi-Wan said. "That's true. But I represent the Jedi. You must trust *us*, not just me."

Reluctantly, Astri nodded. "So we're a team?"

Obi-Wan nodded grimly. "For now."

Astri was hopeless with a blaster, but she was adept with a vibroblade. Obi-Wan gave her a quick lesson in strategy and defense. Her body was agile and strong, and she was surprisingly quick.

"Try to stay behind me or at my side," Obi-Wan told her. "But don't get in the way of my lightsaber."

"Don't worry," Astri told him.

The door to the training room opened and Tahl hurried inside. She immediately turned her face toward Didi's daughter.

"Astri, you're here, too?"

"Yes."

"I have a clue," she said. "It's not much, but it's something. I couldn't find anything on Reesa On, but just on a hunch I ran the name through the language of Sorrus."

"The bounty hunter's home planet," Obi-Wan told Astri.

"It turns out that 'reesa on' means something in an obscure Sorrusian dialect," Tahl said. "It's spoken by a tribe living in a remote area of Sorrus."

"What does it mean?" Astri asked.

Tahl's mouth twisted. "'Catch me.' There is actually a childhood game among this tribe called 'reesa on.'"

"So the name is a taunt," Obi-Wan said. "Catch me if you can."

"Exactly," Tahl agreed. "I have the coordinates of the tribe's area. I doubt that the bounty hunter is there. Jedi teams have been sent on other leads. Most are working on finding Zan Arbor's lab by tracking medical shipments. This is such a tiny lead. Still..."

"We could find out more about her," Obi-Wan said.

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"And we have nothing else to go on," Astri agreed.

Tahl cocked her head as if testing the meaning behind Astri's words. "We?"

"I'm going with Obi-Wan," Astri declared. Tahl shook her head. "You can't go on a Jedi mission, Astri."

"But this isn't a mission," Astri argued. "There's no danger involved."

"Where the bounty hunter is or could be, danger is there," Tahl said sharply. "Don't forget that."

Astri's chin set defiantly. Even though Tahl couldn't see her, Tahl was able to pick up her stubbornness. She frowned.

"I promised Astri she could come with me for a time," Obi-Wan told Tahl. "The bounty hunter shot her father, Tahl. She has a right to track her, too. And she'll be in less danger if she's with me. I'll send her back to the Temple if I think the bounty hunter is on Sorrus."

"I don't like this," Tahl declared. "I should confer with Yoda. You need to be temporarily assigned to a Jedi Master, Obi-Wan. Or else stay at the Temple."

"But I'm not going on a mission, just scouting out a lead. Qui-Gon needs my help," Obi-Wan argued.

He saw the hesitancy on Tahl's face.

"I have to find my Master, Tahl," Obi-Wan said steadily. "I feel him. I know he needs me. Let me go."

"I'm sure we are breaking several rules here," Tahl murmured.

Obi-Wan smiled. "Qui-Gon would like that."

Tahl smiled, too. "Yes," she said softly. "There is a tech transport ship that could drop you off at the capital city closest to the desert tribe..."

Obi-Wan looked at Astri. "Let's go."

Chapter Seven

Qui-Gon waited for his hour of freedom. He did not know when Zan Arbor would grant it. He wanted it so badly it was difficult for him to think of anything else.

Being suspended in this vapor without sight and sound was a particular kind of torture. Deprived of his senses, he experienced dislocation. He had to be conscious of his mind at all times, wrench it back to its surroundings. He could move his muscles very little, and he flexed them, one by one, every half hour. That was an effort. The constant withdrawal of blood was beginning to sap his strength.

He knew that at the Temple he was appreciated for several things: his physical strength, his connection to the living Force, and his patience. Now he hung in a chamber, and none of these things were available to him. He would just have to find other things he was good at.

The loss of his patience was the worst. He could not calm his raging desire to be free. He dreamed of freedom as another might dream of food.

So much for his great forbearance. Now he realized that he had many more lessons to learn. How many times had he heard Yoda advise an advanced student that for a Jedi, true mastery of

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a skill was only the beginning step to understanding it? How many times had he said the same to Obi-Wan?

The more you know, Padawan, the less you know.

By the time this was over, he would see how much he still had to learn about patience.

Was it his imagination, or was the vapor beginning to thin? Qui-Gon looked down and could see his feet. Yes, the vapor was slowly siphoning away. Did that mean that Zan Arbor was about to release him?

He had made no plans for his first release. His only intention was to talk to Zan Arbor again. Somehow he felt he would gain a clue of how to proceed.

The vapor cleared. His heartbeat quickened. He saw movement outside the transparent wall of the chamber.

"I see you're excited, Qui-Gon." Zan Arbor's cool voice penetrated the chamber. "Try to contain yourself. I didn't throw you a party."

The chamber walls slid down, disappearing into the floor. Qui-Gon's knees buckled and he fell forward. The floor against his cheek felt like a gift. Sense had been deprived for so long that the texture of the stone, the coolness of the temperature, felt like fresh rain on his face.

He saw Zan Arbor's boots approach, centimeters from his nose.

"Men have fallen at my feet, but it was in my younger days," she remarked. "How nice to see I still have that power."

He would not speak until he knew his voice would be steady. He reached deep inside for the reserve of strength he knew was still there. He had protected that reserve during the long hours of his captivity.

He did not raise himself to his knees until he knew he would be able to get to his feet. He stood in one smooth motion. He locked his knees.

He had always seen her in rich robes, her hair elaborately styled. Now Jenna Zan Arbor was dressed simply in a white tunic

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and trousers. She was smaller than he remembered. Her hair was drawn back and held with an intricate silver clip.

"I would have thought you were the type of woman who prefers beings to meet you eye to eye," he said.

She smiled. "But so few can. I am told I am intimidating."

"That's what makes the few who match you more valuable."

"I have no interest in other beings anymore, or any conventions of what the majority of those in the galaxy want," Jenna Zan Arbor said coolly. "I don't need friendship. Only my work drives me. Nil!"

A tall, thin being shuffled forward. Qui-Gon recognized a being from the planet Quint. Quints were covered in delicate fur and had small heads with triangular eyes. They were extraordinarily quick and fast. Nil had two blasters strapped to his waist. He put his sharp-nailed hands on his blasters and gave Qui-Gon a contemptuous glance.

"Watch him," Zan Arbor instructed Nil. "Even an unarmed, weakened Jedi is a formidable opponent." She turned back to Qui-Gon. "I should tell you that my security is state of the art. And if you attempt escape, Nil will not hesitate to shoot you."

Qui-Gon had no intention of attempting to escape. He knew he was too weak. He didn't acknowledge what she'd said, but ignored Nil and returned to their conversation.

"How does your work drive you?" Qui-Gon asked. While they talked, he examined the space around him without seeming to glance. It was a Jedi skill. To Zan Arbor, he appeared to be totally fixated on her face.

"How does my work drive me?" she repeated, puzzled. "That seems obvious."

Stone floor. Long metal lab tables. Records piled neatly on a desk. Sensors, computer bank, lab equipment along one wall.

"Not at all. Scientists are driven for different reasons," Qui-Gon said, beginning to stroll about to stretch his legs. Nil followed a few paces behind. "Some for pure research – they have a hunger for how things work. Some want to be

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remembered, to have their name on a discovery. Some think of living beings and want to help them. Which kind of scientist are you?"

Only one exit, a durasteel door. A security pad mounted to one side. He would need a code to exit. Or his lightsaber. Of course, he would have to get by Nil, too.

"Why don't you tell me?" Her gaze was amused as she crossed her arms, tracking his movement. "Which describes me?"

"None of them," he said. "Your ambitions are even grander, I fear."

"You fear? What is wrong with grand ambitions?"

Qui-Gon stopped and faced her again. "You search for the unknowable and attempt to tame what cannot be tamed. Such an effort is doomed to failure."

Only a flare of her nostrils told him that he'd upset her. "So you say," she said, waving a hand. "It doesn't matter. I'm used to being underestimated. You have no idea what I'm capable of."

"On the contrary," Qui-Gon said dryly. "I have a very good idea of how far you will go to get what you want."

"Excellent point," she said, amused again. "You are a worthy adversary, Qui-Gon Jinn."

"I'm hardly an adversary," he responded. "Am I not your subject?"

"I have a feeling you are subject to no one," she answered, the same faint smile on her face.

Nil glanced at her and then gave Qui-Gon a look of pure loathing.

He is jealous, Qui-Gon realized. *Perhaps that is something I can use.*

Zan Arbor might have regretted her softer tone, for she turned away and said briskly, "Now for your part of the deal."

She seated herself at a monitor. "I implanted sensors in your body when I treated your wounds. I am waiting. Use the Force."

"I need strength to use the Force – ""Stop stalling," she snapped.

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Qui-Gon was weak, but he knew he could reach out for the Force and it would be there. He could not show Zan Arbor how much he could depend on it.

He gazed at a clipboard on the table. Using the Force, he caused it to slide rapidly off the table and clatter to the floor.

"A trick a first year student could accomplish!" Jenna Zan Arbor sneered. "I can't get a reading from that!"

Good. "It is the best I can do," Qui-Gon said.

"Liar!" She sprang up from her chair. "How dare you defy me! Don't you realize that you are at my mercy?"

"We made a bargain. You would give me an hour of freedom if I accessed the Force. I did so. I do not think you have the right to be angry," Qui-Gon said steadily.

She moved closer to him. "I... rule... you," she spat out in his face. "Don't forget that."

She snapped her fingers at Nil. "Put him back in the chamber."

"I see you do not keep your word," Qui-Gon said, as Nil grabbed him.

"Do not play with me, Qui-Gon Jinn," she answered angrily. "I know exactly how much strength you have. You think you can deceive me. I will always be one step ahead of you. Don't you understand yet how much I know? You barter for your freedom with nothing. So you will get nothing from me."

Only too glad to use brutality against Qui-Gon, Nil roughly pushed him back to the square outline of the chamber. The transparent walls began to rise.

"The amount of effort you use for the Force will result in the amount of time you are given your freedom," Jenna Zan Arbor told him. "Think about it."

The vapor rose around him as the walls surrounded him. Qui-Gon felt despair rise with the enclosing walls.

I need you, Obi-Wan. Find me soon.

Chapter Eight

Obi-Wan and Astri hitched a ride on a tech transport to Sorrus. The planet was a large one, with varied climates. Over its vast surface were rugged mountain ranges, huge deserts, and sprawling cities. Large bodies of water were scarce, and a complex irrigation system crisscrossed the planet in an intricate series of waterways and pipes.

The pilot of the tech transport landed in Yinn La Hi, one of three capital cities. Obi-Wan thanked him for the lift.

The pilot gazed out at the city. "Good luck to you. I hope you know where you're going."

"A desert region called Arra," Obi-Wan told him, picking up his survival pack. "Are the Sorrusians a friendly people?"

The pilot grinned. "Sure. As long as you don't ask them any questions."

Obi-Wan understood the pilot's words within a short amount of time. He asked three different passersby for information on where to find transport to Arra. Each Sorrusian ignored him.

"Friendly place," Astri said. "I can see where Reesa On gets her sparkling personality."

Ahead Obi-Wan glimpsed a transport center. There, a clerk behind an information desk directed them to a public air transport that made one stop at an outpost in the desert of Arra.

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Although it was customary throughout the galaxy for Jedi to hitch rides on public transport without payment, here on Sorrus there was no such courtesy extended. Astri and Obi-Wan paid for their seats with their few credits.

It was a journey of several hours to the desert. The cities thinned out and the landscape became rugged. They flew over a mountain range. On one side were green fields, on the other desert. Dunes stretched as far as the eyes could see, with not a green plant growing. All Obi-Wan could see were rocks.

The transport pulled up to a desolate landing platform. Obi-Wan and Astri were the only ones to exit.

The air transport rose and disappeared. They stood on the platform and gazed at the sea of sand. The wind blew pellets into their faces, and they pulled up their hoods.

"What now?" Astri asked.

"I have the coordinates of the last-known camp of the tribe," Obi-Wan said. "Let's start walking."

"I'm beginning to worry that this might be a waste of time," Astri said as she trudged beside him. "We might not find the tribe at all."

"It's too soon to worry," Obi-Wan answered. But he, too, felt uncertain. There wasn't a sign of life anywhere, not even vegetation. Who could survive in such a harsh land? Perhaps the tribe had moved on.

They hiked to a sheltered canyon near the foothills of the mountain range. The coordinates matched what Tahl had given him, but there was no sign of a tribe. Obi-Wan slogged through the sand, looking for a clue.

"If they were here, they aren't now," Obi-Wan said. He kicked at a rock. "I don't know how any living being could survive here. There's no food, no water."

"I wouldn't be so sure." Astri bent down and showed him the underside of the rock. It was covered in a greenish substance. She grinned. "Hungry?"

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Obi-Wan smiled and turned to scan the walls of the canyon. "I think there might be caves in the canyon wall."

Astri squinted. "Perhaps they take shelter there during the hot part of the day."

"It's worth a look," Obi-Wan agreed.

Suddenly, an eerie, high-pitched sound split the air. Obi-Wan could not tell if it was the wind, or some strange being.

"What was that?" Astri asked fearfully.

He glanced around, searching for movement. His hand went to his lightsaber. He sensed danger, but he did not know where it was located.

The Force whirled around him, pulsating with the rhythm of the moving sand. He saw a flicker of movement high above. Something was flying down toward him from the canyon wall. Then, more and more shapes filled the air.

Not shapes. Sorrusians. Obi-Wan and Astri were under attack!

Obi-Wan leaped backward as one Sorrusian nearly landed on top of him. They were armed with weapons Obi-Wan had never seen before. They were carved from bone and sharpened on each end. His attackers whirled them in a circle so fast that the sharpened ends were just a deadly blur. There were ten, eleven, twelve of them. He was vastly outnumbered.

Unused to battle, Astri stumbled backward, panic on her face at the numbers of Sorrusians. She fumbled for her vibroblade.

Obi-Wan needed to move fast to cover Astri. He leaped and spun, neatly cleaving his opponent's weapon in two.

"Stay behind me, Astri!" he called. She moved a few steps backward, already slashing with her vibroblade at an attacker from her right.

Obi-Wan cleanly sliced another Sorrusian's weapon in two, and sprang to protect Astri from three Sorrusians advancing from different directions.

Astri's vibroblade came down on the sharp blade of the Sorrusian weapon, slicing it to a dull end. Lightsaber pulsing, Obi-Wan whirled and dispatched two opponents with a sky-to-

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ground sweep followed by a quick reversal. He dropped to one knee and sliced the weapon of the third.

The others had seen what the lightsaber could do and began to retreat. Obi-Wan saw this with relief. He did not want to harm any members of this tribe. Any chance he had of cooperation would be lost.

One of the robed members of the tribe raised a hand and emitted a harsh, cawing sound. Simultaneously, the rest of the tribe dropped their weapons.

"We do not bring trouble to your people," Obi-Wan said to the Sorrusian who had raised his hand. "We come for help."

"We do not help strangers."

There was a gasp when Obi-Wan deactivated his lightsaber and it disappeared with a buzzing sound.

The Sorrusian leader circled around Obi-Wan and Astri. He said something in a dialect Obi-Wan didn't understand. His gestures indicated that they had hoped to find something worth stealing and were disappointed.

Obi-Wan reached into his survival pack. "I have food capsules." He held out a handful of capsules, and they were quickly snatched away. A female handed them out to the children first.

Obi-Wan watched the tribe eat hungrily. There wasn't much to satisfy them. He wished he had more food. Astri quickly distributed her rations as well.

Obi-Wan took a few steps toward the leader, who had refused the rations and watched the tribe eat.

"Why do you stay here if you are starving?" Obi-Wan asked. "Across the mountains is a fertile valley."

The leader said nothing. Obi-Wan feared the stony Sorrusian silence would not crack. But the leader must have felt he owed Obi-Wan a response since they had given a gift of food.

"You think we remain here because we choose to do so?" He shook his head. "Once there were fertile patches in the desert as well. We planted and had plenty to eat. It was a hard life, but it

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suiting us. Then ten years ago a dam was built. The water was diverted from our lands. Harsh winters have followed, one after another. What little land we were able to cultivate has dried up."

"Then why do you remain?"

"We have tried to move to more fertile lands, but are constantly driven back by other tribes. We are too weak to take land by force."

"The government of Sorrus will not help you? The planet has an irrigation system -"

The leader gave a harsh laugh. "The government of Sorrus built the dam. And worst of all, our tribe voted for it. We were told it would benefit us. But to get irrigation systems, one must bribe officials."

The members of the tribe began to drift back toward the canyon wall.

"We have come looking for someone," Astri said to the leader.

He did not answer, but kept his glance on the sandy expanse.

"She uses the alias Reesa On," Obi-Wan said. "She is a bounty hunter. She is about my companion's height and size, but with a shaved head. You must know her. She comes from your tribe."

The leader did not answer this time.

"Please help us," Astri said quietly. "Lives of those we treasure depend on it."

The leader simply walked away.

Astri looked after him, distress on her face. "Make him tell us, Obi-Wan. We can't just give up. "

No, they couldn't give up. But what could they do?

A Sorrusian boy a little younger than Obi-Wan came forward. "I know who you are looking for," he told them. "I know her real name and things about her. I can tell you things."

Obi-Wan gave him a shrewd glance. "What do you want in return?"

The boy pointed to Obi-Wan's lightsaber. "This."

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No Jedi was ever willingly separated from his lightsaber. Obi-Wan reached out with the Force. He turned his attention to the boy's mind.

"You admire the lightsaber, but do not want to possess it," Obi-Wan said. "You will tell us the information freely."

The boy looked puzzled. "No, I won't. I just told you that. It's a trade, or nothing."

It never failed to amaze him. Just when he began to feel confident of his Jedi abilities, he was reminded that he was only an apprentice. He could not access the Force as surely as Qui-Gon. He could not affect the boy.

"Come on. What do you say?" The boy's avid eyes rested on Obi-Wan's lightsaber, tucked securely in his belt.

Stricken with doubt, Obi-Wan hesitated. He could not give up his lightsaber. It was unthinkable. But was it the only way to save his Master?

He felt trapped between centuries of Jedi tradition and his own anguish. The dilemma squeezed the air from his lungs. He could not speak. He could not choose.

And meanwhile, his Master could be dying.

Chapter Nine

The next time she let him out of the tank, Qui-Gon was alarmed at the extent of his relief. He had feared that she would change her mind.

Again, he fell to the floor of the lab. Again, he did not rise until he was sure he would be able to stand.

Dressed once more in white, her pale hair drawn back, she surveyed him with glittering eyes. "I am disappointed in you."

His small smile was an effort. "How tragic for me."

"You are not weakening as fast as the others. I don't know why."

"I am sorry to disappoint you. Should I try to die quicker?"

Nil sidled forward a few more steps, his hostile gaze on Qui-Gon. He poked him with the barrel of a blaster. "Do not joke with Madame!"

"Are you going to help me this time so you can have your freedom a little longer?" Zan Arbor asked sharply.

"If I'm to help you, I need strength. I must use my muscles," Qui-Gon said. "If I could walk outside the lab..."

She shook her head. "Impossible."

"If you want me to use the Force, why do you weaken me?" Qui-Gon asked. "When the body weakens, its ability to connect to the Force does as well."

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"I know that," Zan Arbor snapped. She prowled around the lab restlessly. "I discovered that right away. But I need to analyze your blood. I believe there is a way to harness the Force in it. But I can't find it! If I can discover more properties of the Force and how it's used, I can begin to break down exactly what it is."

Qui-Gon did not want to anger her, only distract her. He wanted her to forget how long he was outside the chamber.

"What about your other research?" he asked. "Is investigating the Force worth giving all that up? You saved beings throughout the galaxy. You are renowned."

"I am tired of renown," Jenna Zan Arbor said, as sulky as a child. "What did I get for it?"

"Respect," Qui-Gon answered. "And the knowledge that you have done good for your fellow beings."

"I thought that mattered once," Zan Arbor said bitterly. "It does not. I still had to fight in the Senate for research money. I still had to convince half-brained leaders to run trials of my vaccines. I still had to spend endless hours trying to fund my projects. I should have been working! I am too valuable to have to waste my time."

"That is true," Qui-Gon said. "I did not realize your difficulty." Jenna Zan Arbor was consumed with her own brilliance, he saw. Such beings liked to talk about themselves. If he was careful not to annoy her, he would be able to stay out of the chamber and learn more about her. His only hope for escape lay in understanding his captor.

"No one does," Zan Arbor said, pacing back and forth. "When famine struck Rend 5 and I bioengineered a new food to feed the entire planet, did I get a reward? When the Tendor Virus struck the entire Caldoni system and my vaccine cured millions, what did I receive in return? Not enough. I learned my lesson."

"What did you learn?" Qui-Gon noticed that Nil was looking at Zan Arbor worshipfully. His attention had drifted from guarding Qui-Gon.

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"That I must not depend on the galaxy to recognize my greatness," Zan Arbor said. "I must depend on myself to raise the funds I need. A famine here, a disease there – what does it matter? They will get sick, they will go hungry for a time. Then they will pay for a cure." "I don't understand," Qui-Gon said.

Zan Arbor did not answer him directly. "There is morality in the galaxy, but I have not seen it," she mused. "I have seen greed and violence and laziness. If you look at it that way, I do them a favor. I thin out populations and the strong survive."

Qui-Gon saw behind the veil of her words to a truth that shocked him. He struggled to conceal his disgust. His voice was calm and even when he asked the next question. "So you introduce a virus into a population so that you can then cure it?"

But Zan Arbor must have picked up something in his tone. "I forgot for a moment about the Jedi morality. You think this is wrong."

"I am trying to understand your reasoning," Qui-Gon said. "You are a brilliant scientist. It's hard to follow the turns of your thoughts."

The answer seemed to please her. "Of course I approached the problem scientifically. I used models. I calculated how many deaths it would take before a population panicked. Then I introduced the virus in a certain amount and waited for it to replicate. When a certain amount of people were killed, the leader would contact me. Then I would pretend to work on the antidote I already had prepared. When they were desperate and ready to open their treasuries to me, I dispensed it. So you see there were no unnecessary deaths."

Zan Arbor's eyes were shining with the pride of accomplishment. Qui-Gon saw that everything she said made absolute sense to her. He realized that she was crazy.

Did that make his situation easier, or more complicated?

"You are greatness!" Nil burst out.

Zan Arbor did not seem to register his praise. "I had to do this, you see," she said to Qui-Gon. "The mystery at the heart of

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the Force is my greatest research problem. I had to fund that research. If I get to the heart of the Force, I get to the heart of power. I get to the heart of existence itself."

"And when you do that, what next?" Qui-Gon asked.

"I will have all the power I need at last," she said. "Then friends I have left behind will understand that if sacrifices were made... I... made them for a good reason."

Qui-Gon noticed the slight hesitancy. "Do you mean Uta S'orn?"

"She is my friend. She has stood by me. Supported my work in the Senate. I was grateful, of course." Jenna Zan Arbor looked uncertain for the first time. "But one cannot let gratitude interfere with science."

"So when you discovered that her son was Force-sensitive, you saw a way to further your research," Qui-Gon guessed.

"He said yes right away!" Jenna Zan Arbor cried. "He would do anything for money. He did not realize the commitment he had to make. He was a scientific subject. Surely he should have known there were risks involved..."

"But he did not expect to die," Qui-Gon said.

"I did not expect it either," she said quickly. "But what kind of life did he lose? A life of despair. Uta grieved for her son every minute of her life while he was alive. It is no different now."

"So you believe she will understand," Qui-Gon said.

Behind Zan Arbor's coolness, he sensed unrest. "She must. It is logical."

"It will be an interesting conversation, I'm sure," Qui-Gon said neutrally.

"It is time for you to use the Force," she said suddenly, as if she regretted her words. "And this time, I want to see something more than your moving an object a few inches."

Qui-Gon summoned the Force. He closed his eyes and felt it around him, felt it connect him to the living beings here and the world outside – wherever he was. He gathered it inside his body to help it heal...

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And he felt an answering call.

Someone else was here. Obi-Wan? Qui-Gon concentrated, drawing the Force around him.

No, not Obi-Wan. Someone else. She was holding someone else here, someone who was Force-sensitive. And whoever it was, he or she was very weak.

He heard beeping and opened his eyes. Zan Arbor sat at the console, leaning forward to study a monitor.

"Excellent," she breathed.

He let the Force slip away. She turned and scowled.

"I am tired," he said.

"Then you won't mind returning to your chamber to rest," she taunted.

Yes, he minded. But not as much as he had before. Someone else was here. Next time she let him out, he would be ready to fight.

Chapter Ten

Before Obi-Wan could speak or move, Astri stepped forward. "Why do you want his light-saber?" she asked the boy.

He thrust out his chin. "What difference does it make?"

"What if you want it so you can use it against us?" Astri challenged. "Why should we hand it over then?"

"I don't want to kill you!" the boy protested.

Astri studied him. "But you do want to find food for your family and your tribe. And you think if you had this weapon you could defeat the tribe on the other side of the mountain."

The boy stared greedily at the lightsaber. "I have seen what it can do."

"There are two problems with your plan," Astri said calmly. "The first is that you have to train for years in order to use a lightsaber. Isn't that right, Obi-Wan?"

He nodded. "Even then, you have more to learn."

"So you wouldn't get anywhere," Astri concluded. "Except maybe you'd cut off your own foot. The second thing wrong with your plan is that it won't solve your problem. Maybe if you fought this tribe and won – which is highly unlikely, by the way – you'd get enough food for a week, or a month. But you'd still be starving when the food ran out. You'd have to fight again. And this time the other tribe would be prepared to meet the attack."

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The boy stared at her sullenly. "So what? I would still have the lightsaber. I would fight them."

"Still, we aren't about to hand over such a powerful weapon so easily," Astri said. "We'll make you a deal."

Obi-Wan shot her a look. *We?* He hadn't said a word.

Astri ignored him. "If you tell us what you know, I'll cook you and your family a delicious meal. I'll show you where to find food and how to prepare it so you won't ever have to go hungry.

The boy laughed. "You'll show me how to be a cook?"

"I'll show you how to feed your tribe," Astri corrected. "Not for a week, or a month, but always. And if I can't do it, you get my friend's lightsaber."

Obi-Wan shot Astri a look. He hadn't agreed to this. She put a finger to her lips.

The boy looked out over the vast landscape of sand. Not a living, growing thing could be seen. Slowly, he smiled.

"It's a deal."

"Okay," Astri agreed. "Run and get a pack to put food in and we'll begin."

The boy's name was Bhu Cranna. He followed behind them as Astri and Obi-Wan trudged through the sand.

"I hope you know what you're doing," Obi-Wan murmured.

"You stick to lightsabers. I'll stick to food." Astri moved to the shadow of the canyon wall. Where sand met rock, she dug down into the crack. She came up with a small purple mold.

"Looks delicious," Obi-Wan said doubtfully.

Grinning, she handed it to Bhu. "You'll see."

For the next hour, Obi-Wan and Bhu trailed behind Astri, following her instructions as they scraped mold off the bottom of rocks and dug deep underneath the sand to find roots. Astri cut off strips of flesh from a spiny plant and then captured the juice that flowed from its heart. They crawled on their hands and knees through a cave to find mushrooms growing in the cracks of rocks.

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Obi-Wan fretted about the delay, but something told him that information about Reesa On was crucial to finding Qui-Gon. He only hoped that Astri's plan would work.

"When I took over the cooking at the café, I had a plan," Astri explained as she pulled the spines out from the fleshy plant she'd sliced into pieces. "Every week I would feature dishes from one world in the galaxy. Luckily, Sorrus was one of those worlds. I chose it because it's so large and so many Sorrusians travel through the galaxy."

"If this is their own food, why doesn't the tribe know how to find this?" Obi-Wan asked, indicating the plants and mushrooms they had gathered.

"Because we were always able to cultivate crops," Bhu volunteered. "It's only recently that we've run completely out of water."

Astri nodded. "In the Tira desert on the other side of Sorrus, they never had a water source, so they live off the desert. I figured that the same kinds of plants must grow here, too. And they do." She held up a gnarled root. "This is called turu root. Tastes pretty awful raw. But if you cook it right, it can be delicious."

Obi-Wan looked doubtfully at the plant. "I can't believe Didi's and Qui-Gon's lives hang on a root. Can you really make all this taste good?" "Just watch me."

Astri pounded roots into paste. She spread mushrooms out in the sun to dry. She ground little bits of leaves and roots and combined them into spices. Then she began to roast this and stir that and assemble the various items into a meal.

When the meal was ready, Astri served it to the boy and his family. Bhu turned out to be the son of the tribe leader, Goq Cranna. He was the first to taste the meal, trying each food one at a time and chewing without expression. The boy and his mother waited, looking at him expectantly. Obi-Wan found that he was holding his breath.

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"It's good." Pleased, the father turned to Astri. "Where did you find these things?"

"I can show you," Bhu said.

"And I can tell you about more," Astri added. "But now you must tell us about Reesa On."

The leader stood. "Her name is Ona Nobis. Bhu will show us where to go."

Obi-Wan and Astri followed Bhu and Goq Cranna across the dunes. As they walked, Astri said softly to Obi-Wan, "Now, what was that you said about my not being able to cook us out of trouble?"

"I stand corrected."

"We do not speak of Ona Nobis," Goq explained as they caught up to him. He spoke in short bursts, like the rest of the tribe. "Her name is forbidden. For money, she betrayed us. A shameful thing. The government agent spoke to us of the wonders of the dam. We were skeptical. Yet she urged us to listen. She persuaded us. Later we discovered that she and this agent had conspired together. They knew the dam would turn our land into this arid place. The agent owned land across the mountain. He wanted fertile lands. So he received the water.

We received the sand."

"What happened to Ona Nobis?" Obi-Wan asked.

"She left before we realized our mistake. We know how she makes her living. Another shame."

"Where are you taking us?" Astri asked.

"My boy found this place," Goq said. "She kept a hideout. Cleverly hidden."

They came to another, smaller canyon. Bhu hesitated when he came to an outcropping of a rock wall.

"When we turn this corner, the wind will be very strong," he warned. He raised his hood and directed them to do the same.

"It is the way the land is formed," Goq said. "It creates a downdraft. This is a place where no one goes."

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They turned the corner. Obi-Wan was nearly blown off his feet. Astri staggered, and he reached out a hand to steady her. He pulled her forward. The wind here was terrible. It drove the sand against their skin and in their eyes. They covered most of their faces with their cloaks.

"This way!" Goq shouted. "Stay close!"

Obi-Wan followed on Goq's heels. The closer they got to the far canyon wall, the worse the sandstorm became. He could no longer see Bhu, who was only a few meters ahead.

When he saw Goq drop to his knees he did the same. He motioned to Astri to go ahead of him so he could be sure she would not get lost.

Obi-Wan crawled, following the others. Ahead he saw Astri disappear into a small opening in the rock face. He squeezed himself through.

Immediately, the wind stopped. Obi-Wan wiped his face and tried to shake the sand out of his hair and tunic folds. Bhu lit a glow rod.

"Follow me," he whispered. "In a few meters, we will be able to stand."

Obi-Wan crawled after Astri. She passed through another opening, and he followed.

Immediately the walls widened. He got a sense of air and space around him. He stood cautiously.

Bhu shined the glow rod. Obi-Wan saw a smooth floor and walls, bedding rolled up in a corner, and something covered with a tarp. He quickly reached for his own glow rod.

He lifted the tarp and held his glow rod high to illuminate the boxes.

"Med supplies. Survival rations."

"We took a vote and decided to leave the survival rations intact," Goq told them. "We did not want her to know that we found this place." He gave a short smile. "We were getting close to raiding the food until you came along. Now we do not need to."

Jude Watson

"So she doesn't know you've found this place?" Obi-Wan asked.

Bhu shook his head. "We have been very careful. I think she was here recently. One of the survival ration packs is gone."

"Now we will leave you here," Goq said. "We will wait for you in the next canyon. If you follow the canyon wall, you will find us."

Obi-Wan thanked them, and Goq and Bhu left.

"Here's a datapad, Obi-Wan," Astri called excitedly.

Obi-Wan hurried over. He quickly accessed the file system. To his relief, the files were not coded.

"These are case files," he said, scrolling through. "Clients. Jobs she took on."

"Any hint of where she could be now?" Astri asked.

"Hold on. Let me access the latest file." Obi-Wan clicked a few keys. He read carefully through the information. "This is it," he said excitedly.

Astri crouched down next to him. "What is it?"

"It's the case she's working on now," Obi-Wan said. "I guess her work for Jenna Zan Arbor is over." He pointed at the screen. "She's shadowing the governor of Cinnatar. That's in this system. It's less than a day's travel from here."

"The governor must be her next target," Astri agreed.

"I'll contact the Temple for a Jedi team." Obi-Wan reached for his comlink, but its indicator light was already activated. Tahl was looking for him.

A moment later, Tahl's clear voice came through the comlink. "We've broken Zan Arbor's code at last. The Jedi are extremely concerned. We know that Zan Arbor is conducting experiments on the Force. We fear that she is holding Qui-Gon in order... in order to experiment on him." Tahl cleared her throat. "Her first experiment was on a subject with the initials RS."

"Ren S'orn?" Obi-Wan guessed. They had known that Senator S'orn's late son had been mixed up in the mystery of the attack on Didi. They had not known why.

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"That is what we believe," Tahl confirmed. "There is a lab notation that further experiments would be done. Yet none were. The notation is dated a few days before Ren S'orn was found dead on Simpla-12."

Obi-Wan swallowed. Ren S'orn's body had been drained of blood. He had been an experimental subject of Jenna Zan Arbor's. But Qui-Gon was so strong, so clever. Surely he would not suffer the same fate.

"You know our fears, Obi-Wan," Tahl said, her voice low.

"Yes."

"I was hoping you had a lead on the bounty hunter. We are discussing how next to proceed."

"I think I do," Obi-Wan said. "We've found out the bounty hunter's real name. It is Ona Nobis. I believe her next job is to assassinate the governor of Cinnatar."

"We will warn him and send a team there to meet you immediately," Tahl said. "Send Astri back here. Contact me when you arrive on Cinnatar."

Tahl shut the communication. Obi-Wan stared at the datapad of Ona Nobis.

"Come on, Obi-Wan," Astri urged. "There's no time to lose. I'm not going back to the Temple. I'm coming with you."

"Wait," Obi-Wan said.

"Don't even try to argue," Astri said, her dark eyes burning. "I'm coming. Hurry. We don't want to miss the last transport back to the city."

He knew he should be hurrying to catch the transport. But something was wrong. Something inside was warning him.

Always listen to doubt. Even in times of great haste, take time to listen. Then trust it.

Qui-Gon's words. Obi-Wan thought about his hesitancy. Something was telling him that Cinnatar was not where he would find answers.

"Obi-Wan!" Astri called in frustration.

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"Tell me something, Astri," he said. "The bounty hunter Ona Nobis is clever. Again and again she surprised us. She even outwitted Qui-Gon."

"Yes," Astri said impatiently.

"So why would she choose as an alias a name that we could trace to the place where she was from?"

"Because she didn't know you would trace it," Astri said.

"A part of cleverness is not underestimating the cleverness of your opponent," Obi-Wan said, shaking his head. "She knows the resources of the Temple. Why would she take such a risk?"

Astri took a few steps toward Obi-Wan. "What are you saying? That she *wanted* us to find her?"

"No. She wanted us to find this." Obi-Wan gestured at the cave. "And *this*." He pointed to the datapad.

"But it was so hard to find. Bhu stumbled on the cave by accident..."

"It was only a matter of time before some member of the tribe found this place," Obi-Wan said. "They wander in search of food and water. She knows this."

He touched the datapad. "What if she wanted to send us on the wrong trail? What if she is still working for Jenna Zan Arbor?"

"You could be right, Obi-Wan," Astri said slowly. "But we need to be sure."

If he made the wrong choice, it could mean Qui-Gon's life. Yet a choice must be made.

Obi-Wan closed his eyes. He filtered out haste and worry. He breathed in his fear of making a wrong choice and let it go. He listened to his instinct. If it was wrong to go to Cinnatar, where was he to go?

After a long moment, he opened his eyes. "We are going to Simpla-12, where Ren S'orn was found," he told Astri.

Chapter Eleven

The next time Qui-Gon was released from the chamber, Jenna Zan Arbor was not in the lab. Nil pushed him forward roughly. This time, Qui-Gon did not fall. He had gained back some of the strength he had lost. The Force was helping him now, slowly, by degrees. He was learning now to use his captivity to reach out to the Force and let it trickle rather than flow.

Knowing that at least one other being was held here had helped him. It had given him a purpose larger than himself.

"Where is she?" he asked Nil, trying to sound casual.

"None of your business," Nil growled. "Maybe she doesn't want to talk to you anymore."

Qui-Gon gave him a considering glance. "Maybe it's you who doesn't want me to talk to her."

"You mock her," Nil burst out. "You are not her friend. You don't realize her greatness."

"Well, you work with her, Nil. No doubt you see things that I do not. You are the one who is valuable to her," Qui-Gon said.

"That's right!" Nil thumped his chest. "I am the one who protects Jenna! Don't forget that. If you try anything, I will shoot you down. I will not be the one to miss like *Ona Nobis*!"

Ona Nobis. That must be the bounty hunter.

Jude Watson

"Yet if she only has you to talk to, she might get bored," Qui-Gon added.

"She was not bored before you came!" Nil snarled. "I was enough for her."

So Nil was the only guard.

Qui-Gon drew the Force around him. A sensor light began to glow on the console as his vital signs slowed, but Nil did not notice.

"She doesn't need Ona. She doesn't need you. She has me," Nil muttered. "All this talk distracts her."

Qui-Gon intensified his effort. He knew that when the Force was strong, the sensor would make a shrill sound. He needed a split second of distraction, no more.

The piercing sound of the sensor split the silence. Nil turned, startled.

In that moment, Qui-Gon moved, quicker than the eye could see. He had gathered his strength for just this moment. He twisted Nil's arm behind his back and disarmed him of one blaster before Nil could blink. He tried to remove the other blaster from Nil's belt as Nil twisted. Nil put his hand over Qui-Gon's, squeezing, and the blaster went off. The pulse of blaster fire pinged past Nil's ear. His eyes rolled back in his head, and he fainted.

Qui-Gon dragged Nil to the door. He remembered the tones of the security code and plugged it in. Then he pressed Nil's thumb against the register. The door opened. He dragged Nil back, but as he did a red light suddenly shone on the console and the door began to close. There must have been an extra security precaution he didn't know about.

Qui-Gon threw Nil down and lurched forward. He got his arm inside the door before it closed.

Pain ripped through him, but he did not extract his arm. He maneuvered his body so that his other arm was free. He reached over to the lab table. A long, steel instrument lay on the table,

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just out of his reach. Concentrating the Force, Qui-Gon caused it to fly into his hand.

Using all his strength, he pushed the door farther open. It opened, centimeter by agonizing centimeter. When the opening was big enough for him to squeeze through, he wedged the steel instrument against the door to hold it. Then he eased through.

He raced down the hallway, every sense alert. He did not want to run into Zan Arbor. Three doors led off the hallway. One to the left, one to the right. One straight ahead. Qui-Gon paused.

He listened with the Force. He sent out as much of his energy as he could. The effort was exhausting.

He felt an answering burst.

Qui-Gon turned right. He accessed the door and found himself in another hallway. Qui-Gon took the first door to his right. To his disappointment, he saw he had merely accessed a storage area. Shelves ran from floor to ceiling and were filled with durasteel containers and medical bins. He glanced at the labels. There were enough antitoxins and medicines here to cure whole worlds...

There was a disturbance in the Force. Qui-Gon began to turn, but he felt a pain in his back. His legs went numb. He fell.

"That's enough!" Jenna Zan Arbor barked.

Qui-Gon saw her approach along with Nil. Nil was carrying a harness. He strapped it onto Qui-Gon, who was now paralyzed.

"Drag him back to the lab," Zan Arbor said. "Thank you, Qui-Gon, for that magnificent demonstration of the Force. I will have some readings to analyze now. Thank my stars I can always count on Nil to be outsmarted."

Nil leaned down. Fury twisted his face.

"We should kill him," he said to Jenna Zan Arbor.

"All in good time," she said coolly.

Chapter Twelve

In a galaxy full of notorious planets, Simpla-12 was one of the most notorious of all. Once, it had been rich in minerals, but held little life and no native beings. The planet had been mined and abandoned. Then gradually it became a landing spot for trawlers and a haven for space pirates. A small colony sprang up, and an economy of sorts developed, based on gambling and the sale of black market goods. Violence was common.

There was only one colony on Simpla-12, called, in a burst of optimism, Sim-First. No other colonies had followed. Instead Sim-First had spread like mold over the planet's surface. The outpost was a sprawling, snaking growth of buildings with a maze of narrow walkways made of metal ties sunk into the dirt. Mud oozed from the cracks between the ties. Many of the buildings had fallen into disrepair and had been patched with scrap metal and odd bits of plastoid materials.

Simpla-12's sun was weak. The planet was known for its heavy cloud cover, which made for a constant drizzling rain that dripped from a sky of lead.

"You take me to the nicest places," Astri murmured as they slogged through the mud.

"It's perfect for someone who wants to hide," Obi-Wan said. Was that why his instinct told him to come here? Was Jenna Zan

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Arbor's secret lab on Simpla-12? When he had contacted Tahl to tell her his destination, he could tell by her tone that she thought he was on the wrong trail. She did not try to stop him, however. She had sounded distracted, as though she was concerned with more important leads. No doubt she was relieved that Obi-Wan and Astri were pursuing what she felt would be a fruitless mission. It would keep them safe and out of trouble.

Obi-Wan had to agree that he was following the slenderest of threads. He tried to call Qui-Gon, reaching out to the Force. He felt nothing. He touched the stone inside his tunic and felt its reassuring warmth. He could not shake the feeling that every step he took brought him closer to his Master.

It did not take them long to discover the names of Ren's associates on Simpla-12. On a world such as this, information could be bought for a few credits. Ren's associates-Cholly, Weez, and Tup-could be found at the 12 Tavern.

They were directed down an even narrower, dirtier lane. The metal ties that formed the walkway were completely covered in mud and garbage. Ahead a sign with the number 12 roughly painted in red swung in the drizzling rain.

They were almost to the building when suddenly a body came flying out of the tavern's front door. With a thump, the body landed face first in the street, sending mud flying. A second body followed, landing with a squeal and a curse.

The first body stirred. "Weez! That's my foot!" Astri started forward. Obi-Wan put a hand on her arm. "I think we'd better wait."

A third body flew through the air, landing a short distance from the other two.

"Don't be so touchy!" the third being yelled back at the tavern.

A huge Devaronian stepped out onto the front porch of the tavern. Quickly, the three beings scampered backward on their hands and knees. Obi-Wan could not tell their species, but they were all humanoid.

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"And don't come back again!" the Devaronian boomed. He turned and thumped back into the tavern. The door slammed shut behind him.

"That was your fault, Tup," the first being said. He was the tallest of the three, with hair that straggled down his back.

"Was not," Tup said, wiping mud off his round face. "Gibbertz and ham, who knew he had no sense of humor?"

The one called Weez wiped mud out of his eyes. "Most beings don't like having their mothers called Kowakian monkey lizards."

"I thought his mother *was* a Kowakian monkey lizard," Tup said.

The first being, who Obi-Wan assumed was Cholly, stood and tried to wipe the mud off his face with the end of his tunic. He only succeeded in grinding more mud on. "What are we going to do now? We've been thrown out of every tavern in Sim-First."

Obi-Wan walked forward. "Maybe a few credits would get you back inside one of them."

Tup puffed out childish plump cheeks and blew out a short, explosive breath. "Woosh. Great idea, stranger. Thanks for the tip. Only, guess what? We don't *have* any credits."

"Maybe there's a way you can earn some," Astri said.

"You have work?" Weez asked. He stood next to Cholly. He was a few inches shorter. "Sorry. We have a back injury."

"I can see why, if you keep getting thrown out of places," Astri said.

"The galaxy," Cholly said sadly, "conspires against us."

Tup struggled to his feet. "We are merely victims of its violent tendencies."

"Innocents must suffer," Weez sighed. "Such is fate."

The three stood next to one another. Covered in mud, they were like three descending steps. This ridiculous trio was his best lead to Qui-Gon?

Patience, young Padawan. Suspend your judgment, and every being has something to teach you.

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Obi-Wan sighed. "We're not offering you a job. We want information and we're willing to pay for it."

Cholly attempted to look shrewd. "What kind of information? We don't squeal on friends."

"Unless they get on our nerves," Weez said quickly.

"This friend is dead," Obi-Wan said.

"In that case, let's see the credits," Cholly said, as Weez and Tup looked more cheerful. Astri held out a few credits.

"That's all?" Tup asked in dismay.

"We haven't heard anything worth paying for yet," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"What do you want to know?" Cholly asked. He reached out for the credits, but Astri closed her fist before Cholly could grab the currency.

"It's about Ren S'orn," Obi-Wan said. "Can you tell us about his last days?"

At the name, the three friends traded sad glances.

"Ren." Tup took a deep breath, then let out a long, drawn-out sigh. "Poor Ren. He told us about this offer he got. He was going to get paid a lot of credits. We're always talking about the big score. Something to get us out of here. Ren said he found it."

"Did he say what it was?" Astri asked.

"He was going to be part of this big experiment," Weez said. "Some scientist thought his brain was really special or something. Wanted to study him. Ren said he'd do it for awhile, but she was going to end up paying bigger than she thought."

"Obviously, Ren ended up paying bigger than *he'd* thought," Cholly said. The three friends bowed their heads.

"Did he tell you where the lab was?" Obi-Wan asked.

The three of them shook their heads. "When he got back, he wouldn't say."

"What was he like when he came back?" Astri asked.

"Different," Tup said.

"Weak," Weez said. "He shook all the time." "He was scared," Cholly said flatly.

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"And then he was killed," Tup said. "Woosh. It was sad."

Again, the three bowed their heads.

"Why was he scared?" Astri demanded. "Don't know. He wouldn't say."

"Maybe Tino would know," Weez said.

"Who's Tino?" Obi-Wan asked. Asking this trio questions was like pulling the fur off a Wookiee one hair at a time.

"Ren's roommate. He took him in when he got back from that experiment," Cholly said.

"Ren said he needed to hide out for awhile," Weez added.

"Tino used to hang around with us, but he got a job. Works over in that big warehouse near the landing platform."

"Can we have the credits now?" Cholly asked. He held out a hand.

Astri counted out a few credits.

"Hey, that's not very much," Weez complained.

"You didn't give us very much," Obi-Wan said. He had a feeling the three knew more. He was anxious to talk to Tino.

Obi-Wan and Astri left the three squabbling about how to divide up the credits and hurried back the way they'd come. Obi-Wan had noticed the big warehouse by the landing platform.

"Maybe Tino will have more answers than that bunch," he told Astri.

"Let's hope so," she agreed.

By the time they reached the warehouse they were almost as muddy as Cholly, Weez, and Tup. Huge loading doors stood open and inside they could see a multilayered structure of catwalks, ladders, ramps, and chutes. Small, compact tech droids rolled through the aisles, pushing gravsleds filled with durasteel crates and boxes. Obi-Wan scanned the area until he glimpsed the person in charge, a woman of middle years in a gray unisuit with a headset, who was barking orders at the droids.

Obi-Wan approached her.

"We're looking for Tino," Obi-Wan said.

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She didn't take her eyes off the droids. "He's unloading in Sector Two. Through that door there. Tell him to get a move on and get back here," she said. "I need those droids!"

Obi-Wan and Astri followed the woman's directions and hurried through the door into the Sector One portion of the huge warehouse.

There was no one on the ground floor, but one level up they saw a sandy-haired young man in a unisuit. Droids on the next level were pushing crates onto a chute. The crates slid down and the young man hefted them and loaded them one at a time onto a gravsled.

Obi-Wan glanced around for the ladder that would take them up one level. He paused as he felt a sudden disturbance in the Force.

Quickly, he scanned the warehouse. The droids moved in orderly rows, the crates rolled down. There was no movement on the catwalks above...

Then he saw her one level above Tino. At first she was just a shadow. Then she moved, and the shape became Ona Nobis. Dressed all in black, she looked down at Tino. Unaware, the young man below continued to work, sweeping a bin off the chute and loading it onto the gravsled.

She unfurled her whip.

"Watch out!" Obi-Wan shouted.

Chapter Thirteen

Tino looked up, startled by Obi-Wan's cry. Obi-Wan was already gathering the Force to make his leap. He landed on the catwalk overhead and teetered back for an instant, trying to get his balance.

Fortunately, Ona Nobis was surprised and her timing was off. The whip flailed uselessly in the air. Obi-Wan had time to note the shock turning to anger on Ona Nobis's face as he raced down the catwalk and onto the chute leading straight toward her.

Astri was already running up the stairs, trying to get to Tino. His lightsaber in his hand, Obi-Wan dodged the boxes that Ona Nobis began throwing down at him. He did not look forward to tangling with the bounty hunter without Qui-Gon by his side.

He reached the next catwalk. The whip flashed above his head. Obi-Wan saw it coming and slashed at it with the lightsaber. The two lasers tangled as the whip wrapped around the blade of his lightsaber.

Below him, Astri pushed Tino behind a stack of durasteel bins. Ona Nobis unfurled her whip once more, releasing Obi-Wan's lightsaber. Immediately, he charged toward her. In a flash, she set the whip to normal mode and snaked it around the railing of the opposite catwalk. Then she used the whip to swing to the

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other side. Obi-Wan heard the *clang* of her landing on the metal catwalk.

She now had a clear shot at Tino.

"Astri!" Obi-Wan yelled.

Astri looked up and saw Ona Nobis. Her face was white and drawn with fear but she grabbed Tino and pushed him farther behind the bins, making sure he was safe before joining him. Obi-Wan admired her courage as he jumped on top of the catwalk railing and paused before his leap across open space.

For him, the Force was sometimes elusive. He was still learning. But now he could feel it around him, steady and strong. It was almost as though Qui-Gon was with him, joining his strength with Obi-Wan's. He leaped across the gap.

He grabbed the railing of the opposite catwalk, his body slamming against the metal. He had no time to feel the pain. He swung himself up and over and charged.

Ona Nobis's lip curled as she set her whip to laser mode. With the other hand, she drew her blaster. The fire pinged around him as he swung his lightsaber in a wide swath, deflecting the fire. He moved steadily toward her.

Meanwhile, Astri urged Tino onto the gravsled. Kicking aside several bins, she got behind the controls and pushed the gravsled to full power. It zoomed down the catwalk away from Ona Nobis.

Good work, Astri.

Ona Nobis cracked her whip. It tangled with the lightsaber. Obi-Wan twisted his wrist, hoping to flick the whip away. Instead, it curled back and struck again.

Obi-Wan twirled his lightsaber around in a lightning-fast move, corkscrewing around the flexible whip. It wound around his lightsaber in a complex tangle.

With a snarl, Ona Nobis pulled back on the whip, but could not dislodge it. She fired her blaster, but she was off-balance and Obi-Wan was able to turn away to avoid it.

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He knew he would not be able to avoid it for long, however. He needed his lightsaber to deflect the fire. Still, he was anxious to deprive his opponent of her most potent weapon. He did not want to let go of the whip.

Use your opponents' strategies against them and you take away their power.

He took a chance and moved closer. She had expected him to pull back, and he drove her farther off balance.

Get your opponents to lose their grace, and they will lose their purpose, Padawan.

Grimly, he advanced farther, pushing against the lightsaber as she stumbled backward, still unwilling to let go of the whip. Her blaster fire pinged harmlessly on the metal catwalk. Her eyes burned with hatred.

He saw now that two of the fingers of her left hand had fused together. No doubt it was as a result of the injury he had inflicted in the battle in the Cascardi Mountains. The hatred and rage she felt was like a thick toxic cloud surrounding them.

He guessed that if he moved quickly, he might be able to release the whip and strike her down before she had a chance to land a blow. He remembered how casually she had shot Didi. And Qui-Gon. He remembered his Master falling back into her ship. He matched her rage and hate with his own.

Do not meet hate with hate. Meet it with purpose.

But what was his purpose? He did not want to take her life, only her freedom. He needed to capture her. Only then would they be able to force her to lead them to Jenna Zan Arbor and Qui-Gon. She would have to make a deal.

Suddenly, he saw Astri behind Ona Nobis. Alone on the gravsled, Astri drove at top speed toward the bounty hunter. They had her between them now.

Ona Nobis heard the noise behind her. She gave one last, enraged look at Obi-Wan. Then she abandoned the struggle for the whip and leaped over the catwalk onto a ramp below. She

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slid down, her body straight and sleek. The ramp disappeared through the floor below into a lower level.

Obi-Wan leaped after her. He, too, slid down the ramp, bumping down as fast as he could, keeping his lightsaber in the air.

But when he got to the bottom, Ona Nobis was gone. He saw a small door leading outside that the droids used. He could not fit through it, but Sorrowian bones compressed so that they could fit in small spaces. He had lost her.

Furious, Obi-Wan trudged back up the ramp to Sector One. Astri waited on the ground floor with a shaky Tino.

"She's gone," Obi-Wan said.

"At least she left this." Astri held up the whip. "Who was she?" Tino asked. He shook his head dazedly. "And who are you?"

Quickly, Obi-Wan explained why they were there. "If there's anything you can add about Ren, we would appreciate it," he finished.

"I owe you both my life," Tino said. "Of course I'll tell you what I know."

He wiped his hands on his unisuit. His blue eyes grew cloudy. "Ren was my buddy. He watched my back, and I watched his. When he told me about volunteering for this experiment, I tried to talk him out of it. He wouldn't listen. Nobody listens to anybody. Especially on Simpla-12. Those clowns Cholly, Weez, and Tup thought it was a great idea."

Tino sat down shakily on a durasteel bin. "He came back really spooked. Said he didn't realize what he'd been in for. He talked this scientist into letting him go and promised to come back. But he wasn't going back, he said."

"Did you notice a change in him?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Sure. He lost all his strength," Tino said. "He could hardly squash a bug. That's why he hid at my place. He kept saying..." Tino looked at Obi-Wan. "That he'd go to the Jedi for help, as

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soon as he was strong enough. But first he had to go back to the lab."

"What was he afraid of?" Astri asked.

"Her," Tino said. "Whoever she is. He said he'd stared pure evil in the face."

Obi-Wan felt a chill. This was the person who held his Master.

"Then why did he have to go back?" Obi-Wan asked.

Tino shook his head. "He wouldn't tell me. Maybe because I didn't really believe him. Ren was always such a big mouth. Always talking about his big connections. Said he came from a powerful family."

"He did," Obi-Wan said.

"Yeah. So I heard, after he was dead. But I didn't know then. So when he said he had to get insurance, that this scientist wouldn't dare kill him if he went back, I didn't believe that, either." Tino looked up, his eyes bleak. "And then he died."

"I'm sorry," Astri said quietly.

"Me, too. You know, I told all this to the security force."

"Simpla-12 has a security force?" Obi-Wan asked, surprised. He'd thought it was one of the lawless worlds.

"The Coruscant security police investigated," Tino said. "Some big Bothan..."

"Captain Yur T'aug?" Obi-Wan asked.

"That was the guy. He was in charge of investigating the murder. I told him what Ren told me – that if something happened to him, he had left behind a clue, something that would lead them to this scientist and her lab. I told them to ask Cholly, Weez, and Tup. Ren talked to them, too. But he never questioned anybody on Simpla-12. He just shipped Ren's body back to Coruscant, to his mother. I guess they didn't care that much about solving the murder."

Obi-Wan thanked Tino. He and Astri walked slowly from the warehouse.

"What now?" Astri asked.

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"I wonder why Captain Yur T'aug didn't follow up on any leads," Obi-Wan said.

"You know him?"

"He investigated Fligh's murder," Obi-Wan said. "He didn't seem very interested in finding that killer, either."

Astri nodded. "I have a feeling we're heading back to Coruscant."

Chapter Fourteen

Qui-Gon floated in the chamber. His limbs felt heavy, but the paralyzing dart was wearing off.

Jenna Zan Arbor's face loomed through the vapor outside the chamber. He could just make out the outlines of her face. "Did you really think you could escape?"

"It seemed worth a try," Qui-Gon said.

"I am tired of our game," Zan Arbor said. "You amused me once. I was kind to you. I let you out of the chamber."

"Let us not forget that it was you who imprisoned me in the first place," Qui-Gon said. "It's hard for me to muster up gratitude under these conditions."

She shook her head slowly. "Look at you. You still have your dignity, even when you are at my mercy."

Qui-Gon met her gaze steadily. "I am a Jedi."

She waved her hand, as if this was something that didn't matter.

"You know," Qui-Gon remarked, "there is something strange to me in your attitude. You seem to have great respect for the Force. Yet you do not respect those who are closest to it."

"That isn't true. I respect you, Qui-Gon. Just as I respect a chemical, or the physical properties of a gas. You are a means to an end."

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"You will never gain what you seek," Qui-Gon told her. "There is a fatal flaw in your plan."

She smiled. "So you say. And what is that?" "Understanding the Force takes wisdom -" "Are you telling me I am not wise?" she asked.

"You have intelligence. Maybe genius. But that is not wisdom."

He had disturbed her. She covered it with a laugh. "I've heard of Jedi mind tricks. You are trying to get me to doubt myself. That is impossible."

"Here is an example of what I mean," Qui-Gon said. "You do not recognize what truth is, so you call it a trick. That is why you are not wise, Jenna Zan Arbor. Wisdom is something you cannot identify because you cannot measure it with your instruments."

She struggled to maintain her tight smile. "Anything else I am lacking to understand the Force?"

"The most important thing of all," Qui-Gon said. "An open heart."

Her expression tightened. "That is an abstraction. Meaningless. Enough of your games. Enough of you. The final experiments will begin. Thank you for your contributions to science. You will die in the isolation tank. I need your blood."

The vapor grew thick. Jenna Zan Arbor's face disappeared. The syringe entered and pierced his flesh. He watched his blood move down the tube.

Qui-Gon closed his eyes. Now, there were only two things ahead. Two things he must keep in balance, far apart though they might be. He must hope for rescue. And he must prepare for death.

Chapter Fifteen

"Captain Yur T'aug is busy," the sergeant said.

"He will see me," Obi-Wan said firmly. "This is a Jedi matter."

The sergeant paused. Coruscant security forces were expected to cooperate with the Jedi, even if they didn't want to.

"I will ask him -"

Pushing past the sergeant, Obi-Wan strode through the door. Captain Yur T'aug sat at a long, polished desk. He was a tall, muscular Bothan, dressed in the security force navy uniform with tall boots polished to a high gleam. He was bent over, staring in a mirror while he clipped his beard. He looked up in surprise as Obi-Wan and Astri walked in.

"I am not to be disturbed!" he shouted. "Why did you drop the investigation into Ren S'orn's death?" Obi-Wan demanded. He had no time for preliminaries.

"How dare you question me!" Captain Yur T'aug sprang to his feet and stalked toward Obi-Wan and Astri. He came within centimeters of their faces. "Get out!" he bellowed.

"Not until I get answers," Obi-Wan said, meeting the captain's gaze resolutely. He had learned from Qui-Gon how to meet bullies with calm strength. He did not raise his voice. Still, he felt intimidated by the captain's manner. He was only a boy. Would the captain listen to him?

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"I have no answers to give you," Captain Yur T'aug sneered. "I investigated a murder. The killer was not found. The case file was rotated to inactive. Do you know how full our caseload is here?"

"Ren's friend told you that he might have been killed because he had information that someone did not want to get out," Obi-Wan said. "You did not question anyone else. Why is that?" Obi-Wan paused. "The Jedi are making this investigation a priority, Captain Yur T'aug."

"So they send a boy to question me?"

"I represent the Jedi Council. Know that if you oppose us, we will pursue this matter."

Captain Yur T'aug backed up a step. "Always the Jedi stick their noses in my business and I am asked to accept it."

"We are working for the same goal," Obi-Wan pointed out. "Justice. Did Jenna Zan Arbor pay you to drop the investigation?"

A flicker of surprise flared in Captain Yur T'aug's angry gaze. But was it because Obi-Wan had guessed the truth, or because he did not know Jenna Zan Arbor was involved?

"The Jedi Council wishes to know the answer," Obi-Wan said. "We will go through official channels if we must. It would be easier if you would tell me the truth here and now."

Captain Yur T'aug let out a breath, as if he'd made a decision. "It is true I was asked to drop the investigation. But it was the request of Ren S'orn's mother. Uta S'orn is – was – a powerful Senator. And it was her son who had died. Naturally I followed her wishes."

"Why wouldn't Senator S'orn want her son's killer to be found?" Astri asked, baffled.

"You will have to ask her," Captain Yur T'aug said. "I do not know."

The last time Obi-Wan had seen Senator S'orn, he had been ushered into a grand office in the Senate building. She had been

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dressed in rich ceremonial robes. Since that time, Senator S'orn had resigned.

She lived in a building near the Senate where other Senators from many worlds kept quarters. She opened the door, dressed in a plain linen smock that hung to the floor. She was not wearing the elaborate wrapped headdress of her home world of Belasco. Her dark hair hung loosely down her back.

She did not look happy to see Obi-Wan. "More questions," she said. "Where's your big friend?"

"I don't know," Obi-Wan said. "That's why I'm here."

She shrugged, then turned and walked into her quarters.

Obi-Wan and Astri followed. Boxes and bins were piled around them, some of them sealed, others half open. She was packing.

"You are leaving?"

"I am returning to Belasco. To do what, I don't know." She gave Obi-Wan a direct look. "Please ask what you came to ask. I am busy."

The Senator had always been direct. He would meet that directness with his own. "Why did you have Captain Yur T'aug drop the investigation into your son's murder?"

"What good would it have done to continue?" Uta S'orn said with a sigh. "He was killed by some lowlife, some criminal on Simpla-12. He associated with them, gambled with them, probably got into an argument. He led a life of squalor. Why investigate it, why drag every sordid detail into the sun? Who knows what Captain Yur T'aug could have found about Ren?" Uta S'orn's expression was tight and strained. "I did not want to know. Don't you understand? I want it all to go away, and you keep bringing it up again."

"But your son might have left a clue behind to help find his killer," Astri said. "He *said* he would leave a clue behind in case he was killed."

"Can't you understand that I don't care?" she said impatiently. She picked up a blanket and began to fold it.

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"What if you knew his killer?" Obi-Wan asked. "Why would I know the dregs of Simpla-12?" she scoffed.

"We believe that Jenna Zan Arbor was involved in your son's death," Obi-Wan told her.

She whipped around to face him. "That is impossible."

"It is true," Obi-Wan said. "We know that Jenna Zan Arbor is conducting experiments on the Force. We know she contacted your son -"

Uta S'orn laughed in disbelief. "You are on the wrong track. Jenna is my friend. I have helped her with her funding, introduced legislation for her, gotten her onto committees, sometimes at personal risk to my career... She would never hurt my son. She didn't even know him."

"Did she tell you that she contacted him on Simpla-12?"

Uta S'orn went pale. She knew the Jedi did not lie. "You know this is true?"

Obi-Wan nodded. "Tell me. She knew Ren was Force-sensitive, didn't she?"

"I told her in confidence..."

"This was at the beginning of her experiments," Obi-Wan said, thinking. "She probably couldn't get to any Jedi. She was looking for anyone who was Force-sensitive, most likely. Beings no one would miss -" Obi-Wan saw pain constrict Uta S'orn's features. "I am sorry. I know you miss your son. Perhaps she thought you would not."

"I was not in touch with Ren at the time," Uta S'orn said reluctantly. "I told Jenna I had disowned him. I was trying to be strong."

"She offered him money if he would be a subject in an experiment," Obi-Wan said quietly. "He went. When he returned, his friends say he was changed. He was afraid."

Uta S'orn's legs seemed to collapse underneath her. She sat on a chair. Her hands went to her mouth. "Did she... hurt him?"

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"We are not sure what happened," Obi-Wan said. "Or why he was killed. Do you know where Jenna Zan Arbor's lab is? Not her official lab. But another lab, a secret lab."

Uta S'orn shook her head. "I didn't know she had one."

"We think Ren left a clue behind," Obi-Wan said. "Do you have anything of his?"

She stood and went to the pile of boxes in a corner. She withdrew a small durasteel bin. "This is all he owned. If there's a message here, I haven't found it." She handed it to Obi-Wan. "Take it. And if you find out your suspicions are true, find her."

"I will," Obi-Wan promised.

Quickly, he and Astri hurried outside. The walkways teemed with beings. The area surrounding the Senate was always crowded.

"We need to go through this bin, but we don't have time to get to the Temple," Obi-Wan said. "I don't want to do it in public. Ona Nobis could be anywhere."

"Didi's Café is close, and I still have the key," Astri said. "Follow me."

She led him down an alley and across the square. Now Obi-Wan recognized where he was. They would approach Didi's Café from the back. Astri snaked through several alleys and they came to the back door.

"Good, the landlord hasn't rented it yet," she said, swiping her key card through the lock. The door hissed open.

There was no power to the building, so Astri opened a shutter a crack to let in enough light to see. They sat at the long kitchen table. Obi-Wan carefully removed the contents of Ren's bin and spread them out on the table.

A utility pouch with one protein food capsule and a small servodriver. A few credits. A vibroshiv. A few crystals. A deck of cards for sabacc. A tunic with empty pockets. A thermal cape, folded neatly.

They were all items carried by the kind of being who owned little and ranged throughout the galaxy. Nothing special. And if

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there was a message here, he couldn't read it either. Disappointment thudded through him.

Astri slumped in the chair. "It's a dead end."

Obi-Wan felt a presence nearby. Out of the corner of his eye a fleeting shadow flickered. There was someone hovering outside the half-shuttered window. He did not turn and look. Instead, he signaled to Astri with a glance that something was amiss.

"Maybe there is something hidden in the lining of the tunic," he said in a normal voice. "I'll fetch something to slice it open."

"Try the office," Astri said. Under the cover of the table, she withdrew her vibroblade from its holster.

Obi-Wan left the kitchen at a normal pace but raced up the stairs to the private quarters above. He slid open a shutter noiselessly and looked down at the alley. Someone in a long, dusty tunic was peering in the kitchen window. The hood to the tunic was raised. He could not identify the person as Ona Nobis, but he knew such a disguise would be easy for her.

He eased out onto the ledge and paused for a moment, gathering the Force. He would need help if he was to meet this opponent again. Drawing his lightsaber in one smooth movement, he leaped toward the intruder below.

Chapter Sixteen

"NOOOOOOOOOOO!" the intruder cried.

Still in midair, Obi-Wan looked down at the surprised face of Cholly. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Weez and Tup spring back out of the way.

Obi-Wan twisted his body in midair to avoid landing on Cholly. But a panicked Cholly moved as well, and Obi-Wan half-landed on him. He cushioned the fall with his hands, feeling the shock of the impact up to his armpits.

"Oof! You're a big one," Cholly puffed.

Obi-Wan rolled off and sprang to his feet. He gazed at the three incredulously as Astri burst through the kitchen window, vibroblade in hand. She took in the situation with one swift glance.

"What's going on?" she demanded. "What are the three of you doing here?"

Tup looked at Weez. "Uh. Sightseeing?" Obi-Wan deactivated his lightsaber but kept it in his hand. "You are interfering with a Jedi mission," he said sternly. "There are lives at stake. So answer me, now!"

"Gibbertz and ham, everyone is so touchy today," Tup said. He blew out a breath. "Woosh."

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"We have just as much right to be here as you do," Cholly said.

"It's a free planet," Weez added. He frowned. "Isn't it?"

Astri brandished her vibroblade menacingly. "It's a big planet. And there's no one around. Haven't you noticed that?"

Cholly scampered backward. "Whoa, whoa, strong lady, okay, okay. We were following you because of Ren's box."

"What about Ren's box?" Obi-Wan asked.

"His personal effects, yes?" Cholly asked. "We requested them from his mother after he... left us."

"We said, for sentimental reasons. We were his best friends," Tup added.

"She said no, why should she give what's left of her son to his lowlife lizard friends?" Weez said. "Some people have no generosity."

"So true, wise friend," Cholly agreed sadly. "The universe is so often against us."

Astri rolled her eyes. "Cut the blather. Why do you really want the bin?"

Cholly, Weez, and Tup exchanged glances.

"Ah, if we tell you, you won't cut us out of the deal?" Cholly asked.

Obi-Wan and Astri exchanged a glance. Obi-Wan did not trust the three scoundrels, but they could give them a lead.

"We'll cut you in," Astri said.

Cholly, Weez, and Tup exchanged another glance. Then they all nodded simultaneously.

"The place where Ren was held," Cholly said. "He said the lab had stockpiled medicines. Vaccines, antitoxins, cures for many viruses."

Astri stiffened. "And?"

"Well. We thought, if such a place has such a stockpile, someone somewhere would want to buy it. And someone would have to sell it."

"So why shouldn't the someone be us?" Weez asked.

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"But Ren said no," Tup volunteered.

"He, too, wanted to steal the medicines," Cholly said. "But he did not want to sell them. He wanted to turn them over to the Senate, or the Jedi. Some agency that would disperse them honestly. And get this scientist in trouble."

"We had a small disagreement about this," Weez said. "We would help him steal them, but only if we made a profit of some kind."

"So what happened?" Astri demanded. "Did he tell you where the lab was?"

"This disagreement was not resolved," Cholly said. "Instead, Ren was murdered. But he told us he had the location of the lab in a safe place. So if something happened to him, someone would know where to go."

"Then something happened to him," Tup added helpfully.

"And his mother would not release his belongings," Weez said.

"So we had nothing, just like before," Cholly added. "Until you came along. Then we thought, well, if you are on the trail of who killed Ren, perhaps we can find these medicines somehow."

"So we followed you," Weez said. "You see? No harm done. The end!"

"Unless, of course, you wish to steal the medicines as well," Cholly added. "There is great profit here for all."

Astri grabbed Obi-Wan's arm and pulled him away. "Now we know for sure that Zan Arbor didn't destroy the antitoxins she developed. She has them, Obi-Wan! We have to find that lab!"

"I know," Obi-Wan said. "But they don't know where the lab is."

"May I suggest something?" Cholly broke in. "Perhaps if we could look at Ren's effects, we would see something you did not. Because we knew him, you see. We would understand the message that you could not."

"Why would he leave you a message if he didn't want to steal the medicines?" Astri asked angrily.

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"Because we are better than nothing," Tup said.

"At least he knew we would try to find the lab," Weez said.

"I hate to say it, but they make sense," Obi-Wan murmured to Astri.

"We might as well see," she agreed.

Beckoning to the trio, Obi-Wan and Astri led them inside the café. Obi-Wan gestured at the items on the table.

"This is what was in the bin," he said.

Cholly picked up various items. "Not much here."

"No datapad?" Weez asked.

Obi-Wan shook his head.

"No big sign that says, LOOK HERE?" Tup asked hopefully.

Weez picked up the sabacc cards and rifled through them.

"We played many a game with these."

"Until no one would play with us anymore," Cholly said.

Weez sighed. "They thought we cheated. The galaxy is so unfair to beings like us."

"Did you cheat?" Astri asked.

"Well, yes," Weez admitted. "We marked the cards. We had our coded system. But we didn't bet much. Se we didn't cheat them out of very much."

"We were fair cheaters," Tup said.

"We are so misunderstood," Cholly said sadly. "Wait a minute," Astri said. "You marked the cards?"

"It's an honest living!" Tup protested.

Astri took the cards from Tup's hands and spread them on the table. "Look at them carefully. Is anything different?"

The three stared down at the cards for a long moment. Then, tentatively, Tup reached out one finger and moved a card away from the pack.

"Look," he said, pointing to the design on the back. "See the mark?"

"Of course," Cholly said. He squinted at the cards.

Jude Watson

Cholly moved another card. Then Weez moved a third. One by one, they separated cards from the pack. Then Cholly arranged them in a row.

"These are marked," Cholly said.

"But the marks don't make sense for sabacc," Tup said.

"They correspond to numbers and letters," Weez said.

"I put them in order for you," Cholly added.

"But what does it say?" Astri asked urgently. "Do you have a durasheet?" Cholly asked. "I can write it out."

Astri scrambled in a drawer for a durasheet. She handed it to Cholly. Consulting the cards, he wrote out:

L 1 Q 2 B U 3 S P 1 2

"What does it mean?" Astri asked, baffled. Cholly, Tup, and Weez exchanged glances. "We have no idea," Cholly said.

"It could be an address," Obi-Wan said. He stared at the sequence of numbers and letters. Different worlds were coded on astrogation maps with abbreviations to identify them. But there were thousands of such abbreviations. He would have to run the sequence through an astrogation computer. The possibilities were almost endless. It would take so much time...

Look for the obvious first. Use what you know. Then move on.

He heard Qui-Gon's words as clearly as if his Master had spoken in his ear. "It could be," he murmured.

Astri only half-heard him. "What did you say?" "S P 1 2," Obi-Wan said. "That's the astrogation abbreviation for Simpla-12."

"So it is," Cholly agreed.

"Could Ren have been held on Simpla-12?" Obi-Wan asked them.

"You could hide anything on Simpla-12," Weez said. "But when he left for the lab, Ren told us he was going off-planet."

"Did you actually see him leave?" Obi-Wan asked urgently.

"No," Tup said. "He said good-bye at a café."

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"The rest could be an address," Obi-Wan said, staring down at the durasheet. "How is Sim First mapped?"

"By quads and blocks," Weez offered.

"Everything is on level one," Tup said. "There are plans for levels two and three, but no one on Simpla-12 can get organized enough to build."

Obi-Wan pointed to the sequence. "Level One, Quad Two, Block Unit 3," he said.

Astri stared at the letters and numbers. "Are you sure?" she asked doubtfully. "This could mean anything."

"I'm not sure of anything," Obi-Wan admitted. "But I say we return to Simpla-12."

Chapter Seventeen

Obi-Wan hailed an air taxi to transport the group to the Temple. As they zoomed through the crowded air lanes, he turned to Cholly, Weez, and Tup.

"I need your help. But we're not going to steal the medicines in order to sell them," he told them. "It would be wrong."

Cholly, Weez, and Tup looked at one another as if this concept was new to them.

"But we helped you," Cholly pointed out, disappointed.

"Why should we keep helping you, if we don't get anything?" Weez asked plaintively.

"This scientist has a bounty hunter working for her named Ona Nobis," Obi-Wan said. "There's a reward for her capture."

"Hey, wait a second," Astri said. "That reward is mine!"

Obi-Wan shot her an impatient look. "You can share it. We need their help. And we need it now."

Astri's aggrieved look faded. "You're right."

Obi-Wan scrawled a few items on a durasheet and handed it to Cholly, Weez, and Tup. "Once we get to Simpla-12, we need you to find these items as quickly as you can. Then you'll meet us at the address."

Cholly looked at the list, puzzled. "Obviously, you are crazy, my friend." Then he grinned and tucked the durasheet into his

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tunic. "But perhaps you will make our fortune. So we're with you."

Obi-Wan had called ahead to alert Tahl that they were coming. He saw her erect figure on the landing platform as they docked. She had agreed to supply him with air transport back to Simpla-12.

Astri leaped from the air taxi as soon as it docked.

"My father?"

"The same," Tahl said. "Obi-Wan, who is with you?"

"Some new friends," Obi-Wan explained. He drew Tahl aside and told her what he'd discovered. "I don't know for sure if Zan Arbor's lab is on Simpla-12," he said. "But there's a chance it could be. And there's a good chance that the antitoxin Didi needs is still stored there – along with Qui-Gon."

"A slight chance is better than none," Tahl said thoughtfully. "If you feel strongly that you must pursue this, then you should do so. But if you find that you are right, contact me immediately. If Jenna Zan Arbor knows that someone has found her, she could kill Qui-Gon."

"I know," Obi-Wan said quietly. "But if I could get inside and find Qui-Gon without alerting her, we would have the information we need to send in the Jedi."

"But how could you do this?" Tahl asked. "And are you sure you could get out again?"

He wasn't sure if he could. But it didn't matter. He had to save Qui-Gon and Didi. That was most important. Obi-Wan glanced at Astri. "I have a plan."

"Do not take any impulsive action, Obi-Wan," Tahl warned. "Simpla-12 is not far. I can send several teams to you if they are needed. And make sure there is no surveillance on the building from the outside. Nothing must alert her that you are there."

"I would never endanger Qui-Gon's life," Obi-Wan told her soberly. "But I feel that the longer he remains her captive, the more danger he is in."

Jude Watson

"I believe this, too," Tahl said softly. Her comlink signaled, and she frowned. "Now I must go."

Several teams are pursuing important leads. May the Force be with you, Obi-Wan."

Tahl hurried away. Obi-Wan climbed into the transport, where Astri and the others were waiting. He powered up the engines and headed straight for the upper atmosphere. With every second, he felt Qui-Gon's life was dwindling. With all his heart, he begged Qui-Gon silently to hold on.

Quad Two was on the very outskirts of Sim-First. Here, any attempts to keep order or cleanliness were abandoned. Many of the buildings were sealed with durasteel sheeting. An occasional speeder flashed by, but there were no pedestrians on the walkways.

Astri squinted through the drizzle. "I didn't think Sim-First could get any worse," she murmured.

Obi-Wan consulted a handheld nav computer. "Block Unit Three is this way."

As they walked, the neighborhood deteriorated further.

Clouds thickened until the day turned as dark as evening. It was easy to stay concealed. The area was all shadow. Many of the glow lights overhead had not been maintained. Occasionally one would send a weak spot of illumination onto the walkway.

Obi-Wan stopped. A short distance away, across the walkway, was a large, windowless building made of shiny black metal. It took up an entire block unit. He pulled Astri back into the shadow of an overhang.

"That's it."

Remembering Tahl's instruction, Obi-Wan left Astri to watch the entrance and skirted around the side of the building. He moved from shadow to shadow, checking for surveillance devices. He climbed onto the roof of a nearby building to inspect the roof below. He could see no evidence of guards. He used his macro-binoculars to study the building from all sides.

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He returned to Astri. "Security must be inside. There's a visual monitor by the front door. There's no thumbprint register or retinal scan. That's good. I have a feeling about this, Astri. This must be the lab."

She looked behind them. "Are you sure you can trust Cholly and the others to come through?"

"Don't worry. They'll do anything for credits," Obi-Wan said.

They didn't have long to wait. Before long, they heard footsteps approaching. Cholly, Tup, and Weez hurried down the street, casting apprehensive glances around.

"Woosh, I'm glad we found you," Tup said as they approached. His round eyes were full of anxiety. "I didn't know Sim-First could be so scary."

"Did you get what I asked?" Obi-Wan inquired.

Cholly unloaded a number of items from his pack. He handed one to Obi-Wan. "Hope it fits."

"It's for Astri," Obi-Wan said as he handed the black visor to her.

Astri fitted it over her head. It obscured her features and gave her a menacing look. "It's fine," she said.

She took it off and shook out her long, curly hair. Next Obi-Wan handed her a pair of high leather boots. Shrugging out of her tunic, she buckled her utility belt tighter around her waist and pulled on the boots.

"One more thing," Obi-Wan said. "I'm sorry, Astri, but -"

She gritted her teeth. "Go ahead."

Using a vibro-razor Cholly handed him, Obi-Wan first trimmed, then carefully shaved off Astri's pretty curls.

"Such a shame," Tup murmured.

Astri's face was set in determined lines. "It's worth it."

When he had finished, Astri fitted the dark visor over her eyes. Her shaved skull gleamed. Obi-Wan handed her Ona Nobis's whip. She coiled it and fastened it to her utility belt. With

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the extra height of her heeled boots, she resembled the bounty hunter.

"I just hope they don't look too closely," Obi-Wan said. He turned to Cholly, Weez, and Tup. "You stay here. If the real Ona Nobis turns up, do your best to keep her out of the building. She's very fast, very clever."

"It's three against one," Cholly said. "How can we fail?"

"You have surprise in your favor," Obi-Wan said. "I gave you a contact number for Tahl at the Temple. If Astri isn't out again in ten minutes, call Tahl and tell her to send the teams after us."

"We will take care of everything," Weez assured them.

Obi-Wan wasn't so sure, but he hoped that Ona Nobis wouldn't show up at all. He didn't need much time.

He and Astri strode across the walkway to the building entrance.

"What did you mean, if *I* don't come out?" Astri asked him under her breath. "What about you?"

"If we find Qui-Gon and can't release him, you must leave without me," he told her. "Contact Tahl and tell her what happened."

"I can't leave you, Obi-Wan -"

"You have to," he said firmly. "I am your prisoner. Hand me over if you have to, then look for the medicines. Then leave. Promise me. You could be Qui-Gon's last hope."

He couldn't see her eyes behind the helmet, but Astri pressed her lips together grimly. "I promise."

She pressed the button. Obi-Wan noted that her fingers were shaking. What if Ona Nobis was already inside? Once again, Obi-Wan marveled at her courage. Astri accepted her fear and charged ahead.

"You're as good as a Jedi," he told her softly.

He could not see her expression under the visor, but she reached out and briefly squeezed his hand in thanks.

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The face of a guard appeared on the screen. Obi-Wan recognized the fine, feathery fur and the triangular eyes of a Quint.

"It's me," Astri said bluntly, pitching her voice low.

"What are you doing here?" the guard asked. "I have a Jedi prisoner," Astri barked impatiently. "Let me in."

The screen went blank. Obi-Wan felt the seconds tick away. Would they be allowed to enter?

The door hissed open. Obi-Wan saw Astri take a deep breath. Then they walked together into the secret lab.

The door shut behind them. They stood in a narrow hallway with a smooth polished floor. There was one double door ahead of them with a small viewing window. They started toward it.

The door suddenly opened and the same Quint guard who had appeared on the monitor hurried toward them.

"We're busy here, you know," he snapped. "You'll have to bring the prisoner to holding room C yourself."

"I don't take orders from you," Astri snapped back.

"Why isn't the prisoner restrained?" the Quint asked suddenly, his steps slowing. "You always use servo-cuffs with prisoners." His hand went for his blaster.

In another moment, Astri's real identity could be discovered. He had hoped to get farther than this, but at least they were inside. Obi-Wan reached out and unfurled Astri's whip in one smooth gesture. He snapped it overhead, aiming for the Quint guard. It wrapped around his ankle and Obi-Wan pulled back with a jerk. The Quint went down with a howl. Obi-Wan jumped forward and quickly wound the whip around the guard, restraining his arms and legs. Then he dragged him past the double doors into a long hallway. Astri ran ahead and accessed a door, which hissed open, revealing an empty holding room. Obi-Wan dumped him inside.

"We'd better hurry," he said. "No doubt he's supposed to report back. And there are probably more guards."

Jude Watson

There were hallways to the left and to the right, and one door at the end of the hallway straight ahead. It was broken and had been left slightly open, its frame bent. Obi-Wan felt the Force surge. His Master was beyond that door.

Obi-Wan motioned to Astri to hang back. Hugging the wall, he moved silently toward the door. He inched over to peer through the opening.

The lab was bright white and filled with equipment. At first he thought no one was there. Then he looked again at a transparent chamber filled with vapor. Through the clouds of gas Obi-Wan clearly saw his Master, imprisoned. Qui-Gon's eyes were closed. He could even be dead.

Obi-Wan wanted to rush into the lab and smash the chamber into a thousand pieces. But he remembered Tahl's warning to be careful. He took a breath and let his anger go. He must concentrate, he must be calm.

He signaled to Astri to follow him and entered.

He approached the transparent chamber. He put his hands on the smooth wall. Qui-Gon floated, his eyes still closed. Obi-Wan felt choked with anguish at the sight. He knew his Master was alive. Yet he felt as though he had witnessed his death.

He didn't think his voice would penetrate the chamber. Obi-Wan spoke his Master's name quietly. "Qui-Gon."

Qui-Gon's eyes opened. He saw Obi-Wan. He smiled. He mouthed the words.

I knew that you would come...

Obi-Wan put his hand on his lightsaber. "Obi-Wan!" Astri hissed. "Someone's coming!"

He hesitated.

"You can't release him yet," Astri whispered. "If anyone knows we are here, we might not be able to get out again."

Obi-Wan looked desperately at Qui-Gon. He had come so far. He had made so many decisions. He did not know what to do now.

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Wait, Qui-Gon mouthed. He signaled with a glance that Obi-Wan should hide.

Obi-Wan heard footsteps. He whirled and grabbed Astri's hand. They dove behind a pile of equipment just as the scientist walked in.

Chapter Eighteen

Jenna Zan Arbor spoke into a comlink as she walked to her lab table.

"Nil!" she barked. "Nil! Where are you?"

She banged the comlink down on the table. "Probably turned it off again, the brainless fool."

Bending over, she studied the data streaming across the screen. She turned and smiled at Qui-Gon. Then she pressed a button on the console. No doubt this would carry her voice inside the chamber.

"Ah, some Force activity. Thank you. But it won't save you, my friend. I am done with you. But I'll take all your blood before I let you go."

She released the button and picked up the comlink again. "Nil! Bring Ona Nobis to me immediately! Nil! Usually she's in a hurry to get paid." She looked at the comlink in disgust, then threw it down and stalked out of the lab.

As soon as she was gone, Obi-Wan hurried over to Qui-Gon. He knew now that if he let Qui-Gon remain in that chamber, his Master would die. He activated his lightsaber and cut a hole in the chamber. The vapor escaped, and Qui-Gon began to fall. Obi-Wan reached in to help support him. Qui-Gon half fell and Obi-Wan half dragged him to the floor.

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"Master," Obi-Wan murmured brokenly. It was shocking to see Qui-Gon so weak. He always counted on his Master's strength.

"You... must... help me, Padawan," Qui-Gon said, his white lips barely moving. His face was very pale. He held up his hands, palms out. Obi-Wan pressed his own palms against Qui-Gon's.

He felt his Master's power flicker and reach out toward him. The Force moved between them. Obi-Wan gathered it around him. He felt the Force grow with their combined effort, felt it flow from his fingers into Qui-Gon.

After a moment, the cloudiness in Qui-Gon's eyes vanished. "I can walk now," he said.

He rose to his feet. Obi-Wan rose with him.

Qui-Gon glanced at Astri's outfit. "I see you have a new profession."

"Yes," she said with a shaky grin. "Saving you."

"We must hurry," Qui-Gon said. "There is at least one other prisoner here. I felt a presence. It is Force-sensitive."

"Didi is dying," Astri blurted. "Zan Arbor has withheld the antitoxin that could save him."

"Then that will be our first priority," Qui-Gon told her. "Come. I think I know where to find it."

Qui-Gon did not move as quickly or gracefully as he usually did. But he gathered strength as he went. They quickly jumped through the half-open door and ran down the hallway. Qui-Gon led them to the supply room he had stumbled upon earlier. He accessed the door and they rushed inside.

"Do you know the name of the antitoxin?" Qui-Gon asked, indicating the shelves.

Astri tore off her helmet and scanned the labels. She placed her hand on a shelf. "Here." She removed several vials and filled a pouch on her utility belt with them. She then filled her pockets with as many other vials as she could. Obi-Wan took handfuls of medicines and tucked them in his tunic.

"What now?" Qui-Gon asked. "Do you have a way out?"

Jude Watson

Obi-Wan shook his head. "We've tied up one guard. Are there other guards?"

"I don't think so," Qui-Gon said. "She relies on Nil and the security system. Between the three of us we should have no difficulty. Zan Arbor does not yet know she has been invaded. Our odds are excellent."

The intercom crackled, and they turned to watch the screen. Ona Nobis appeared.

"I have arrived," she said. "Nil, give me access. Nil!"

"It appears our odds have changed," Qui-Gon said.

Chapter Nineteen

Qui-Gon looked over at Astri's panicked face. He could not imagine what it had taken for this young woman to come this far. She had cooked and run a café, and now she was facing death on a dangerous mission to save her father.

"Do not worry," he said softly.

"But now Zan Arbor will realize she's been tricked," Astri said. "We'll all be trapped. What should we do?"

"Leave," Qui-Gon said, opening the door. "We'll have to come back for the other prisoner. Zan Arbor will discover that she has been invaded. But she won't know where we are."

They raced down the hallway. Qui-Gon felt the weakness in his legs as he ran. Strength was returning, but he knew he would have trouble if he had to fight the bounty hunter. He wished he had his lightsaber.

Before they turned the corner toward the double doors, Qui-Gon stopped and peered around. Jenna Zan Arbor had left the doors ajar. She had her back to them. Ona Nobis stepped into the building.

"There's been a security breach," Jenna Zan Arbor said breathlessly. "I can't find Nil. I think someone is here, trying to rescue Qui-Gon. Two people, one of them a Jedi. Maybe both of them. You must find them."

Jude Watson

"My mission has been completed," Ona Nobis said in a flat tone. "I came for my payment."

"What are you talking about?" Zan Arbor's voice rose. "I'm telling you I'm in trouble!"

"I am telling you it is not my concern," Ona Nobis said in the same emotionless tone. "You sent me after that friend of Ren S'orn on Simpla-12. The Jedi beat me there. That was my last task for you. I have taken on another job. And I have my own plans for that Obi-Wan Kenobi."

"Listen to me," Jenna Zan Arbor spat out. "There are intruders in this lab. You must search the premises and destroy them."

Ona Nobis did not answer. She held out her hand for payment.

"But Obi-Wan Kenobi could be here right now!"

"I will meet him on my terms. Not yours. Not here."

"If you think I'm going to pay you, you are mistaken," Zan Arbor hissed.

Ona Nobis stared at Zan Arbor with a flat, neutral gaze. "If you think you can threaten me, *you* are mistaken. Keep in mind who I am. Do you want to pay me what you owe me, or do you want to die?"

Jenna Zan Arbor seemed to shrink. She was no match for Ona Nobis, and she knew it. She reached inside her robe and withdrew an envelope. She slapped it in the bounty hunter's open palm.

"You will never work for me again," she said furiously.

"How that crushes me," Ona Nobis said coldly. She tucked the envelope into her belt, turned, and left.

The door hissed shut behind her. Qui-Gon quickly herded the others back to the storage room. With any luck, Zan Arbor would hurry back to her lab to try to find Nil. They would use the opportunity to escape.

She walked by them, her face flushed and furious.

"At last," Astri breathed.

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They moved out into the hall and accessed the double door. They were steps away from the entrance when the speaker buzzed. The monitor at the front door suddenly filled with Jenna Zan Arbor's face.

"Greetings to my unwelcome guests, and to Qui-Gon," she said smoothly. "I assume you are on your way to my door to escape. Perhaps you should pause for a moment and consider this. Do you really think I would be so foolish as to rely on one stupid guard and one basic security system to protect what is mine?"

Qui-Gon stopped.

"I did not merely withdraw your blood, Qui-Gon," she continued. "I also injected a device into your system. Not only does it measure your vital signs – by the way, your heart is beating quite rapidly right now – but it also contains a transmitter. If you cross the threshold of this building, that transmitter will set off another. There is another subject in my lab. If you leave, a poison will be released into his system. He will be dead in thirty seconds. You do not know him, but you are close to him. There is a riddle for you. And a choice." She gave a bland smile. "Perhaps you will accept my hospitality for a little while longer."

The screen went black. Obi-Wan turned to Qui-Gon.

"She could be bluffing." Qui-Gon shook his head. "She is not."

"But you have no real evidence that someone else is here," Obi-Wan said desperately.

"But I know someone is," Qui-Gon said. He turned to Obi-Wan. He saw the desperation and dread in his Padawan's eyes. "You know what you must do, Padawan."

"No," Obi-Wan said, shaking his head violently. "I will not leave you."

"You must." Qui-Gon put his hand on Obi-Wan's arm. "You did well. You released me from the chamber. But I cannot leave

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this building, and you must bring those medicines back. Didi's life, and other lives, hang in the balance."

"I can go," Astri said. "I will take the antitoxins."

"You have acted bravely, Astri," Qui-Gon told her. "But we cannot let that much responsibility rest with you. Those vaccines and antitoxins must be duplicated. Both of you must go."

"I can't leave you," Obi-Wan repeated, his voice shaking.

"You must, Padawan," Qui-Gon said. "Getting those medicines back to the Temple is a Jedi mission. A Jedi must complete it."

"There is a Jedi team on the way here," Obi-Wan said. "But now that she knows we have found her. She'll fortify this place. She'll devise ways to keep us out..."

"She cannot keep the Jedi out," Qui-Gon said firmly. "Give me your comlink."

Obi-Wan handed Qui-Gon his comlink. Then he gave him his lightsaber. It was the greatest gift one Jedi could give another. Qui-Gon placed his hand on the hilt.

"I will keep it safe until you return for it," he said. "Now go."

Astri hurried forward. She pressed the button to access the door. Fresh air rushed in with the scent of coming rain.

Obi-Wan looked back at Qui-Gon. Qui-Gon saw anguish and heartbreak on his Padawan's face. "I will return."

He nodded. "I will be here."

Obi-Wan and Astri left. The door hissed shut behind them. Qui-Gon stood in the doorway, Obi-Wan's lightsaber in his hand. The stale air of the lab soon chased away the fresh scent of rain. He had seen freedom only meters away. Now it was gone.

He turned back toward the lab and his new enemy. And now the game would begin.

Book Thirteen
The Dangerous Rescue

Chapter One

Obi-Wan Kenobi heard the door slide shut behind him. The locking system clicked and whirled.

He stopped short as a wave of helplessness overwhelmed him.

"No," he said.

His companion, Astri Oddo, turned. "What is it?"

Obi-Wan faced the closed door with despair. "I can't leave him."

"But he ordered you to go."

Placing his hands against the door, Obi-Wan shook his head. "I can't."

Astri waited a moment. She did not move, but he felt her impatience. Her newly shaved head gleamed in the faint gray light. A heavy mist fell like rain and gathered in droplets on their skin.

"Obi-Wan, we don't have time," she said. "I have to get to the Temple."

Obi-Wan nodded, but still he could not move. Astri's father, Didi Oddo, was dying at the Jedi Temple. Astri carried the antitoxin that would save him. Astri had been a chef at her father's café, and she had bravely joined Obi-Wan in his bold plan to break into Jenna Zan Arbor's secret lab.

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They had succeeded in only part of their mission. They had retrieved the needed antitoxin. But Obi-Wan's Master, Qui-Gon Jinn, was still inside.

Obi-Wan spun around and gazed quickly down the dark street, searching every shadow. "Where are Cholly, Weez, and Tup? They can arrange transport for you."

"They're not here," Astri said, anger tightening her voice as she scanned the street. "I knew we couldn't trust them."

Obi-Wan dismissed the thought of the three scoundrels. They had agreed to watch for Ona Nobis, the bounty hunter who Astri had impersonated to get inside. They were supposed to warn Obi-Wan and Astri if she arrived, but they had not. As a result, Jenna Zan Arbor had known that intruders were inside, and Qui-Gon had been trapped. Obviously, Cholly, Weez, and Tup had fled.

But they weren't important to Obi-Wan now. Getting Astri back to the Temple was. As was getting himself back into the secret lab so that he could fight side by side with his Master.

"Let me contact Tahl," he said. Astri handed him her comlink. He had already given his own to Qui-Gon, along with his lightsaber.

Jedi Knight Tahl's crisp voice came through a moment later. "I'm here," she said tersely.

Quickly, Obi-Wan outlined the situation. "Jenna Zan Arbor is holding another prisoner who she claims Qui-Gon doesn't know, but who is close to him. What do you think that means?"

"I have an idea," Tahl said. "Go on."

"Poison will be released in the prisoner's bloodstream if Qui-Gon leaves the building. He ordered me to leave the lab and conduct Astri back to the Temple. He said that safe passage for the antitoxin was the most important thing. I... felt I had to go, Tahl."

"Of course you did," Tahl said crisply. "Qui-Gon was right to order you. But I don't want you to leave Simpla-12."

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Obi-Wan felt relief flood through him. He was only a Padawan Learner. He would need the permission of a Jedi Master in order to disobey Qui-Gon, even if his Master was currently a captive.

"What about Didi?" Astri asked urgently.

"Don't worry, Astri. Jedi Master Adi Gallia and her Padawan, Siri, are due to arrive on Simpla-12 at any moment. You should see their ship in a few seconds. The pilot can bring you back to the Temple with the antitoxin. Obi-Wan, you will work with Adi Gallia and Siri to rescue Qui-Gon. We'll start with a small team, but we're sending more Jedi to Simpla- 12 in case you need them."

Obi-Wan saw a glint of silver in the leaden sky. "I see their ship. I'll get back to you."

He ended the communication and watched as the small, sleek transport landed in a dirt field nearby. He had worked with Adi and Siri before. Adi was a brilliant and resourceful Jedi with a gift for intuition. Siri was a tough fighter and faced danger without ruffling a hair. The relations between the two Padawans could be bumpy, but he could not ask for a better team to rescue Qui-Gon.

He saw Adi's familiar regal figure stride down the landing ramp. The smaller, blond Siri followed. Adi's sharp gaze scanned the surrounding area, missing nothing. Then she hurried toward Obi-Wan and Astri.

She nodded at Obi-Wan and turned her gaze to Astri. "The transport is waiting. May the Force be with you."

Even at a moment of great urgency, Astri thought of others. She put her hand on Obi-Wan's arm. "I know Qui-Gon will be safe."

"And I know Didi will be well," Obi-Wan told her.

They had been through much together. Astri had no Jedi training, no Force-sensitivity, and could barely manage to hit a target with blaster fire. Yet Obi-Wan had come to admire her

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many skills. Her fear was obvious but she never failed to charge ahead.

Now she fumbled as she withdrew the vibroblade from her belt. "Here. You might need this."

He took it from her. "Thanks. I'll see you back at the Temple."

Biting her lip, Astri nodded. Then she rushed off, wobbling a bit in the thigh-high boots she had donned to impersonate Ona Nobis.

Siri's hand rested lightly on her lightsaber hilt. Her bright blond hair was combed straight back and tucked behind her ears. Her no-nonsense appearance matched the way she attacked a problem. She did not waste time.

"Tahl contacted us a moment ago," she told Obi-Wan. "Zan Arbor has blocked out all communications from the lab, but Qui-Gon managed to get a last message through to the Temple. Zan Arbor has locked herself in with the other prisoner. If Qui-Gon attempts to come through the door, she will kill the captive. He is searching for another way inside that room."

"Did he see the other prisoner?" Obi-Wan asked.

Siri shook her head.

"We think we know who he is," Adi said. "He is a Jedi Master."

Obi-Wan was startled. "She was able to hold two Jedi Masters hostage?" How could such a thing happen?

"Noor R'aya is an elder Jedi," Adi explained. "He does not live at the Temple. He no longer goes on missions, but he chose to live out his remaining days in seclusion and meditation on his home planet. He disappeared several weeks ago, and we've been searching for him."

"We traced his disappearance to the bounty hunter, Ona Nobis," Siri explained. "As soon as we told Tahl this, she told us about Jenna Zan Arbor's involvement. Noor R'aya must be the other being Qui-Gon sensed at the lab."

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"Our first problem is getting in," Obi-Wan said. "There are no windows and only one door. Other Jedi teams are on their way, but the more we delay, the more we risk Qui-Gon's and Noor R'aya's lives. And Simpla-12 has no security police. It's just us."

"It's not a problem," Adi said serenely. "We have a way in."

Chapter Two

"We've learned through our contacts that someone is looking for a large shipment of black market assassin droids for protection on Simpla-12," Adi said. "We know this person is Jenna Zan Arbor. We've tracked down the droid dealers. Now we just need to get the dealers to agree to smuggle us inside along with the shipment."

"When is the transfer supposed to happen?" Obi-Wan asked anxiously.

"As soon as possible," Adi replied. "The droid sellers got the definite impression that Zan Arbor is planning to leave the planet. She could have lied, but I'm guessing her departure plans are behind the urgency of the request. She needs protection in order to leave and she needs protection wherever she goes. She knows the Jedi are on her trail."

"If she's planning to leave, we can't wait for reinforcements," Obi-Wan observed.

Adi nodded grimly. "I agree. Let's head for the warehouse where the droids are being loaded. The sellers are waiting for us."

The warehouse was a dingy metal structure that tilted alarmingly to one side. The foundation was sunk deep into the mud. Simpla-12's constant cloud cover made for frequent rain,

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and Obi-Wan, Siri, and Adi slogged through ankle-deep mud to reach the entrance.

As Obi-Wan pushed open the door, he heard familiar voices.

"Gibbertz and ham, these droids are old. Couldn't you have found some newer models?"

"Oh, of course, why didn't you say so? Let me reach into my deep pocket full of credits and pay for them."

Obi-Wan groaned aloud. "You don't mean to tell me," he said to Adi and Siri, "that the droid sellers are Cholly, Weez, and Tup?"

"You know them?" Adi asked.

Just then, Cholly caught sight of Obi-Wan. "My friend!" he cried in a warm voice that did not disguise his nervousness.

"Jedi Kenobi!" Weez echoed as Tup slid behind him to hide. "We did not expect you!" "Why?" Obi-Wan asked, walking toward them. "Because you thought I was Zan Arbor's prisoner? Because you said you would prevent Ona Nobis from approaching the building, and ran away instead?"

"Well, no," Weez said, shifting his feet nervously. "I wouldn't say that's why."

Tup peeked out from behind him. "We are on your side, Obi-Wan."

"As long as you don't have to risk your own necks," Obi-Wan observed.

"Well, of course," Weez said. "But we are like that with everyone!"

"Wait, let me think. Did we ever say we were brave? I don't think so!" Cholly pointed out.

"And Ona Nobis was a very frightening being," Weez said.

"Woosh," Tup said, blowing out a breath. "You must admit that. But we did follow her!"

"You did?" Obi-Wan asked sharply. "Where did she go?"

"To her own transport," Cholly answered. "She left Simpla-12, we know that."

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At least they had given him one piece of information. Ona Nobis was gone for good. She had told Zan Arbor that she would not work for her any longer. She had more profitable clients.

"You can make it up to me now," Obi-Wan said, frowning. "You let the Jedi down once. Do not do it again."

"Never, never, never," Weez said, shaking his head.

"Unless there is terrible danger," Tup added quickly.

"This shouldn't be dangerous for you," Adi said. "All we want you to do is let us hide in your shipment of droids to Zan Arbor. We will find a way to sneak out after you have left."

"Ah," Cholly said. "That would be *after* we get paid, then?"

"Yes," Adi said impatiently. "We just need a way into the building."

Cholly, Weez, and Tup exchanged glances. "Excuse me so much for asking this," Cholly said. "But what is in it for us?"

"In other words, it sounds risky," Weez explained helpfully. "And there's no reward for our risk."

"Well, we're not going to pay you," Adi said. She fixed her dark, commanding gaze on the three, who squirmed at her scrutiny. "Is that what you are suggesting?"

"Of course not," Tup said stoutly.

"Unless, of course, getting into the lab is very important to you – important enough to pass along a few credits..." Cholly's voice trailed off when Adi continued to stare at him. "It was just a thought," he added weakly.

"How about this," Siri suggested in a pleasant tone. "You help us or we'll smash all your droids."

"Siri!" Adi's voice was sharp. "Jedi do not threaten."

Siri's mouth closed, but she continued to stare fiercely at Cholly, Weez, and Tup, her hand on the hilt of her lightsaber.

"I have two reasons you should help us," Obi-Wan said, trying to keep the impatience from his voice. They did not have time for this delay. "First, because you owe me. And second,

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because Jedi make better friends than enemies. And you three can use friends, I think."

"That is true, since everyone despises us," Tup agreed sadly.

"All right, we'll help you," Cholly decided. "But wait until we're out of the building before you start your Jedi saber rattling."

Siri paced around the gravsled hauler, where the three had been loading droids. There was no exterior shell on a gravsled, just a platform and a windscreen. "But how can we hide? They'll see us at once."

"Don't you have a covered vehicle, like a skiff?" Adi asked.

"We could barely afford the gravsled," Cholly said. "But let me show you something. First, we have to unload the droids. Weez, Tup!"

Cholly, Weez, and Tup unloaded the handful of droids that had already been loaded onto the gravsled. Then Cholly pressed a lever, and a hidden compartment in the gravsled slid open. It was cleverly disguised so that it appeared to be part of the vehicle's shell.

"We occasionally have the need for secrecy in transporting objects," Cholly explained. "You mean smuggling," Siri said.

Adi peered into the opening. "Not much room, but I think we can all fit."

"You have to hide first. Then we load the droids," Weez explained.

"That means you have to unload the droids before we can get out," Siri observed with a frown.

Adi drummed her fingers on her holster. "Not the ideal situation. You'll have to offer to unload the droids as soon as we get inside."

Cholly did not look happy at this, but he nodded.

"What about programming the droids?" Adi asked. "Did Zan Arbor already give you instructions?"

Weez shook his head. "She's going to program them herself."

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"Offer to do it. Make something up," Adi suggested. "Then sabotage them in some way. Better for us not to face twenty attack droids."

"We'll do our best," Cholly said. "You'd better get inside or we'll be late for our appointment."

Adi folded her long, elegant body into the small compartment and lay flat. Siri followed. Obi-Wan squeezed inside.

"Oof," Siri muttered. "Watch your elbows." "I've got no place to put them," Obi-Wan responded.

"Quiet, you two," Adi said. "We won't be here for long."

Tup's cheerful face loomed above them. "I'm going to shut the panel now. Don't worry, there's plenty of ventilation."

"I hope so," Obi-Wan said softly as the panel slid closed just millimeters from their upturned faces. "I don't like having to put our trust in these three."

"Maybe because your friends seem so untrustworthy," Siri said.

"They aren't my friends," Obi-Wan muttered. Why did Siri always have to needle him?

For long minutes, they listened to Cholly, Weez, and Tup loading the droids, quarreling and fussing all the way.

"The more we fit, the more she'll take, if we're lucky!" Cholly exclaimed. "Don't put them in that way, Tup, you're taking up too much room."

"Woosh, I'm doing the best I can."

Adi sighed. "This is taking too long." She thumped on the top of the panel. "Hurry it up!" she shouted.

"Yes, yes, we're hurrying. Only a few minutes more," Cholly called.

Obi-Wan closed his eyes. Why was he always asked to be patient at the moment he was jumping out of his skin? Every second of delay was frustrating.

Adi spoke quietly. "Knowing Qui-Gon, I am sure that he has his own plan, Obi-Wan. We are not his only means of rescue."

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"I am sure that he does as well," Obi-Wan said, grateful for Adi's words of reassurance.

"There is just one thing that troubles me," Adi murmured. "I only hope his plan does not collide with ours."

Chapter Three

For days, while he was stuck in the vapor-filled chamber, all Qui-Gon had wanted to do was get out and stretch his muscles. Thanks to his Padawan, he had been released from the chamber. But now, when he finally had his freedom, he found himself in an even tighter space – a ventilation shaft.

Jenna Zan Arbor had sealed herself into the room where she held the other prisoner. It had been a wise move. She knew that Qui-Gon would not dare to break in. She knew he would not gamble with the other being's life.

He could not use Obi-Wan's lightsaber to get through the door. He could not take any aggressive action. With a sensor in his body and one in the other prisoner's, both of them could be dead in an instant.

He would have to use stealth. He had found the ventilation shaft that ran through the ceiling. He had been crawling for what felt like a long time. He could not make a sound to alert her, and he had to be mindful of his direction as well. The various shafts were a maze. But if he was careful, he could wind up in the ceiling over Zan Arbor's head.

What then? Qui-Gon wondered. He could drop down on her from above. But what if the trigger for the sensor was concealed in her clothing? Even if it were somewhere on a console, could

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he persuade her to disable the sensors? Could he believe her if she said she had?

He didn't know the answers to those questions. But he could not wait outside the door, wondering what was going on inside.

He spied a vent ahead and carefully moved toward it. He lowered his face and peered through.

He was over the lab at last. He saw the top of Zan Arbor's head. The same kind of transparent chamber he had been kept in was in the middle of the room. It was filled with a cloudy gas, so he could not see the occupant.

Zan Arbor paced back and forth with short, quick steps. He recognized the angry movement. Something else had gone wrong.

"Do not think you can fool me," Zan Arbor said furiously. "I know you are willing yourself to die. You refuse to access the Force. I will not let that happen!" She strode over to a bank of equipment. "You want to die?" she asked shrilly. "Then know what it feels like to die!"

She turned an indicator knob. Qui-Gon did not know what she was doing. He could only imagine. Zan Arbor's goal was to break down the essential elements of the Force into something she could measure and control. Qui-Gon knew firsthand how ruthless she could be if her subject did not cooperate.

Hold on, he urged the prisoner silently.

She switched off the dial. "Well? Are you still so interested in dying? Now show me the Force!" Qui-Gon saw her send a sharp gaze to a chronometer to check the time. She was under some kind of pressure. Why?

"All right, then. If I cannot use you, you are just a liability. But I'll take all your blood *before* you die, just for being so uncooperative."

Her hand went for the dial again. It was time to act. Qui-Gon eased out Obi-Wan's lightsaber in one swift, practiced movement and reared back to kick through the vent.

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But he checked himself just in time as an indicator buzzed and Zan Arbor hesitated. She pressed the communication button.

A voice blared, "Droid shipment."

"It's about time," she snarled.

She whirled and stalked from the room without another word. Qui-Gon settled back on his haunches, thinking. He could not release the prisoner until he knew that Zan Arbor was immobilized and unable to kill him. But any delay could seal his doom completely.

He was more trapped in his freedom than he'd been as a prisoner. What should he do?

Chapter Four

The gravsled ride was smooth while they were outside, but Cholly, Weez, and Tup had trouble maneuvering the craft through the narrow hallways of the lab. Each time Weez slammed into a wall, Obi-Wan, Astri, and Adi were thrown against one another, and the droids rattled noisily overhead.

"That's enough!" Obi-Wan recognized Zan Arbor's commanding tone. "Just stop! You can unload where you are."

With a last shuddering lurch, the repulsorlift engine lowered the gravsled to the floor.

"You can see that we only brought you the finest droids," Cholly said.

"These are your finest? I'd hate to see the rest."

"If you pardon my saying this, this *is* Simpla-12, ma'am," Weez said respectfully. "There isn't much choice to be had."

"I suppose so. Give me the CIP."

Obi-Wan tensed. The Central Intelligence Processor would program all the droids at once. Adi had instructed Cholly to try to program the droids himself. Would Zan Arbor allow him to do so?

"There's the matter of our fee..." Cholly said.

"Not until I'm sure these droids are operational."

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"I can program them for you, ma'am," Cholly offered. "Part of our service. We aim to please!"

"It *pleases* me to program them myself. Give me the CIP." Apparently, Cholly hesitated, for Zan Arbor snapped, "Now!"

Adi let out a breath. Obi-Wan knew what she was thinking. It would have been easier if they didn't have the droids to contend with.

They heard a series of beeps and the sound of the droids' movements as they were activated.

"Follow my voice command only," Zan Arbor rapped out. "You will surround and protect me. We will be leaving from the launch pad on sublevel one in five minutes."

The droids beeped an affirmative response.

"Now unload them and I'll pay you the credits," Zan Arbor said to Cholly, Weez, and Tup. "Quickly!"

Overhead, Obi-Wan heard the noise of droids being unharnessed and wheeled off the gravsled platform.

"Watch out, Tup!" Cholly called. "You just -" "I didn't! Weez..."

"Don't pull that way, push -"

"Not that way, over here, you idiots!" Zan Arbor shouted.

"I have it!"

"No, you don't!"

"I do!"

"No, you -"

A screeching noise and a great crash sent the gravsled shaking.

"Woosh," Tup said in a small voice. "Guess I didn't."

"Do it this way, Tup," Cholly shouted.

"If you didn't shout like that, I wouldn't be so confused," Tup dithered. "Just let me -"

The gravsled rose slightly in the air. There was a crash.

"Turn off the engine! You're tipping it!" Zan Arbor screamed.

"The droids are falling - -" "Gibbertz and ham, let me -"

"Don't touch that!" Cholly and Weez screamed at the same moment.

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It was too late. Tup hit the hidden lever, and the compartment door sprang open. Adi, Obi-Wan, and Siri tumbled out onto the floor. They rolled away from the repulsorlift engine as the gravsled hovered a few inches above the floor.

"Jedi!" Zan Arbor screamed.

Most of the droids had been unloaded, and the Jedi had landed right in the midst of them. The gravsled hemmed them in against the wall.

"Attack!" Zan Arbor shouted, backing away from the gravsled. "Shoot to kill!"

Tup's face went white, and he dropped to the floor. Cholly and Weez jumped off the gravsled. The droids wheeled, positioning the blasters built in their arms.

Adi, Obi-Wan, and Siri reached for their lightsabers. Blaster fire erupted from every direction. They were caught in a deadly crossfire.

Chapter Five

Qui-Gon had just decided to go through the vent and rescue the prisoner when he heard the sound of blaster fire. That could mean only one thing. A Jedi team had arrived.

With one smooth motion he cut through the shaft with Obi-Wan's lightsaber and dropped to the floor. Then he accessed the lab door and burst out into the hallway, racing toward the sound.

He rounded the corner and swept the battle with one glance. The Jedi were faced with twenty armed droids. Obi-Wan had no light-saber, just a vibroblade. Jenna Zan Arbor stood in the opposite corner, watching. The sneer on her face announced that she was confident of victory.

Qui-Gon watched for a few extra seconds in order to grasp Adi's strategy. Even while she mowed down droids, she protected Obi-Wan from the worst of the fire. She was using a series of short, fast combinations designed to obscure the fact that she was steadily making progress toward Jenna Zan Arbor and the hallway to the rest of the lab.

Obi-Wan was using the vibroblade effectively, but it was no match for blaster fire. Qui-Gon decided, even as he leaped, that his job would be to protect his Padawan, leaving Adi free to go after Zan Arbor.

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A flash of joyful relief lit Obi-Wan's face as he saw Qui-Gon sail toward him. His moment of distraction was smoothly covered by Adi, who in a lightning strike took out a droid who aimed a blaster at Obi-Wan. Qui-Gon came down, knocking out two droids as he landed and whirling to deflect fire from a third. He was surprised to find that although he had succeeded, his reaction times were slow. He could not trust his body to move quickly. The days of captivity had taken a worse toll on him than he'd thought.

Qui-Gon received a sense of satisfaction when he saw Zan Arbor's expression turn from smugness to alarm. She knew now that the tide would turn against her. With a sharp command, she ordered four droids to surround her. Her back was to the wall.

Qui-Gon accessed the Force to help him overcome his body's weakness. He deftly attacked, slashing through the metal bodies of the droids while Siri whirled and dived, her lightsaber a blur. The young girl's footwork was impeccable. Obi-Wan was hampered by his vibroblade but kept up a steady attack, sweat pouring down his face.

There were only five droids left, excluding the guard around Zan Arbor. Qui-Gon did not need to look at Adi for confirmation as he drove the droids toward her. They would catch them in a pincer movement. Understanding his intent, both Siri and Obi-Wan moved to flank him.

The plan would have worked perfectly if Tup hadn't chosen that moment to make a break for safety. Hearing a slight lull in blaster fire, he scrambled out from underneath the hovering gravsled and dashed toward the hallway.

Unfortunately, he crashed into two droids, driving them back toward Obi-Wan. The droids wheeled and raised their arms toward Tup, prepared to blast him.

"G-giberbtz and h-ham!" Tup screamed.

Obi-Wan was closest. He accessed the Force and leaped, coming down with both feet hitting the two droids squarely. The droids wobbled and the blaster fire went awry. Obi-Wan landed

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and swung his vibroblade at the first droid. It raised its blaster toward Obi-Wan.

Qui-Gon reached out a hand to use the Force to send the droid flying. Nothing happened. Adi reversed direction to neatly slice the second droid in two.

"Zan Arbor," Siri said tersely.

Jenna Zan Arbor had taken advantage of the distraction to slip out from behind the droids that were guarding her and dash down the hall. She was just disappearing into a turbolift.

"There are stairs," Qui-Gon told Adi. "Second door on the left."

"Siri and I will follow," Adi told him, already starting off.

"We'll see to the prisoner," Qui-Gon said, signaling to Obi-Wan.

He raced down the hallway, his Padawan by his side. They burst into the lab. Qui-Gon strode to the cloud-filled chamber and cut through the material with Obi-Wan's lightsaber. The transparent material peeled back and gas escaped in a vaporous cloud.

The chamber was empty.

"We have been fooled," Qui-Gon said quietly. "Maybe Noor R'aya is in the other lab," Obi-Wan suggested.

Qui-Gon looked startled. "Noor R'aya? The prisoner was a Jedi?"

"Adi thinks so."

"She said I did not know him, but I was close to him," Qui-Gon murmured. "Of course that is so. Every Jedi shares a bond."

"We should head for the launching pad," Obi-Wan said. "Zan Arbor said it is on sub-level one."

"In that case," Qui-Gon said, "I am sure it is not. Come, Padawan."

He did not know for certain if he was right, but he had come to know the turnings of Zan Arbor's mind, the way she strategized. She would enjoy flipping the situation so that the Jedi

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were in the opposite place of where they should be when she made her escape.

So instead of heading for sub-level one, Qui-Gon headed for the roof.

He did not trust the turbolift. No doubt she would have sabotaged it. He took the stairs, Obi-Wan at his heels.

They burst out onto the roof just in time to see Jenna Zan Arbor's craft rise in the air. They saw the body of Noor R'aya in the seat next to her. He was slumped over as if he were too weak to raise his head. She smiled and waved a split second before the craft shot into the upper atmosphere.

They had lost her again.

Chapter Six

Obi-Wan waited while the Jedi medic, Winna Di Uni, attended to Qui-Gon. She located the sensor implanted in his bloodstream and carefully extracted it. While he waited, Obi-Wan searched the lab and located Qui-Gon's light-saber. It was a great pleasure for him to place it back in his Master's hands.

"How is Didi?" Obi-Wan asked Winna.

She smiled. "On the mend. He is already suggesting better ways to prepare his meals."

Qui-Gon groaned. "Whatever you do, don't listen to him." Didi's abilities as a chef were dismal.

Winna touched Qui-Gon's shoulder. "You've been through a trauma, Qui-Gon. Your body has not recovered fully. I suppose it would be fruitless for me to tell you to take it easy."

Qui-Gon winced as he slid off the examination table. "Not until we find Noor."

Obi-Wan saw the signs of fatigue he had missed in his joy to have his Master well and safe. Jenna Zan Arbor had drained Qui-Gon's body of blood. She had kept him confined for long periods of time. His skin looked pale and his face drawn. The experience had weakened him.

"Are you sure you shouldn't return to the Temple?" he asked Qui-Gon in a low voice.

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"No," Qui-Gon said sharply.

Adi and Siri strode into the room.

"We've checked all the computer files," Adi said crisply.

"There's no indication of where she might go next."

"There was an assistant, Nil," Qui-Gon said.

"Not anymore," Siri said. "We found him in one of the storage rooms. A lethal injection, we think."

"He was a liability," Qui-Gon said. He turned away. "She will stop at nothing."

"Yes, that's why we must find her," Adi agreed quietly.

Cholly, Weez, and Tup peered around the corner.

"If you're no longer in need of our services, we thought we would go back to our poverty-stricken but basically safe existence," Cholly offered.

"She had the credits in her hand," Weez said. "If only Tup hadn't started the engine -"

"Or knocked over the droids -"

"Woosh, everything is all my fault, all the time, forever," Tup complained.

"Yes, it is," Cholly and Weez said together.

Qui-Gon's comlink signaled. "It's Tahl."

A miniature hologram of Tahl appeared before them. "I am relieved to hear that you all are safe and that Didi will recover," she said. "The Force is with us. Winna, how is Qui-Gon?"

"Fine," Qui-Gon said tersely.

"Excuse me, did I ask you that question?" Tahl demanded. She was one of the few Jedi who was brave enough to challenge Qui-Gon, let alone tease him. "Winna?"

"He has undergone a great trauma," Winna said. "My best advice would be to return to the Temple, but I know he is needed. There will be no lasting damage. He just needs rest and food."

"Then you will release him on a mission?" Tahl asked.

"Release me?" Qui-Gon thundered irritably. "Am I still a captive?"

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"No, you are a stubborn Jedi who might push himself beyond a limit his body cannot handle," Tahl answered.

"I see no danger to him," Winna said reluctantly. "I have seen how quickly Qui-Gon is able to recover his strength. As long as he has been honest with me about how he is feeling and not covering up any weakness."

Qui-Gon glared at her.

"I'm sure he was covering them up," Tahl said crisply. "However, we must pursue Jenna Zan Arbor. The Council wishes the two Jedi teams to join together to find Noor."

Obi-Wan glanced at Siri. So he would have to work with her again, side by side. He hoped she had learned a little more humility since their last mission.

"I have news for you, Obi-Wan," Tahl said. "And you will not like it. Nor do I. As soon as she was assured that Didi would make a full recovery, Astri left the Temple. She has gone off to pursue Ona Nobis in hopes of getting the reward."

"Astri is no match for Ona Nobis!" Obi-Wan cried in surprise.

Tahl sighed. "I know this. Yet there is nothing the Jedi can do. She does not wish our protection any longer. We cannot force it."

Obi-Wan felt frustration and worry battle within him. Yet he knew Tahl was right. The Jedi did not impose protection. And his mission was to find Jenna Zan Arbor.

"Adi and Qui-Gon, contact me when you decide on your next move," Tahl finished.

"Meanwhile, I am coordinating the search for Zan Arbor's ship."

"It's a big galaxy," Qui-Gon said.

"Then I'd better get going," Tahl said, and signed off.

More and more, Obi-Wan had grown to appreciate having Tahl as a liaison within the Temple. When they rescued a blinded Tahl from Melida/Daan, he had never expected how important she would become in their lives, as well as their missions.

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"It's been a swell adventure, but we must be going," Cholly said.

Adi turned to them. "We are grateful for your help. We regret that you were caught in a battle."

Weez waved his hand. "It was nothing." "Especially when it was over," Tup said, blowing out a relieved breath.

Giving a last bow and a quick wave from Tup, the three hurried from the lab. No doubt they were anxious to get away from the Jedi, Obi-Wan thought. It was no wonder that Cholly, Weez, and Tup were such hopeless criminals. Their courage did not match their greed. At the first sign of trouble, they ran.

Qui-Gon turned to Adi. "Did you and Siri discover anything that could help us while you were investigating Noor's disappearance?"

"I don't think so," Adi said thoughtfully, "but let me tell you a little about him. Noor had a deep connection to the Force that led him to choose a life of meditation when he became an elder. He left the Temple and returned to his home planet, Sorl, where he planned to live in quiet seclusion. He built a simple home in the foothills of the great mountain range of Cragh. Things did not turn out quite the way he expected."

"As they seldom do," Qui-Gon noted.

Adi nodded. "When Siri and I reached Sorl, we discovered that to pass the time, Noor had begun to craft small landscapes out of stone, sticks, and vegetation. He made small animals and figures and placed them in these imaginary landscapes, places he had seen over his long life. We saw them in the yards and fields surrounding his home. They were charming. Beautiful."

"Ah," Qui-Gon said. "And they began to attract some attention."

Adi smiled. "From the children. They began to come by to watch Noor work. He began to make toys for them. Soon he was involved in the life of the community. His life of seclusion became a life of engagement."

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"Life surprises you. Accept the gift," Qui-Gon recited. It was a Jedi saying.

"So you see, all we know about Noor will not help us here," Adi finished. "I think we must concentrate on Jenna Zan Arbor. Yet so much of her life is a mystery...."

Obi-Wan's comlink began to signal him. He stepped off a few paces to accept the communication.

"My name is No Muna and I am a medic at the Med Center on Sorrus," a voice said. "I was given your name by Astri Oddo..."

"Is Astri all right?"

"I am afraid she is not. An accident – she is not conscious, I'm afraid. She gave me your name before she passed out. She asked you to come here. Yinn La Hi is the capital city of Sorrus, in the system of – "

"Yes, I know where it is," Obi-Wan interrupted. "Thank you. If she awakens, tell her I am on my way."

He cut the communication. The others had stopped talking and were listening to him. He met Qui-Gon's gaze.

"I have to," he said.

Qui-Gon frowned, but Obi-Wan knew it was a frown of concentration, not displeasure.

"Yes," he said. "We cannot leave Astri on Sorrus alone. But the chances of finding Zan Arbor and Noor diminish with every moment of delay. Adi and I will remain here to begin the search. You go with Siri to Sorrus and escort Astri back to the Temple, if she is able to travel. We'll either meet back at the Temple or tell you where you must come." Qui-Gon seemed to recall that he was supposed to collaborate with Adi. He turned to her. "Do you agree?"

There was a beat before Adi responded. "I agree." She turned to Siri. "I am sending you alone with Obi-Wan. This means I am trusting you not to engage with the bounty hunter Ona Nobis or pursue any lead unless you contact me."

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"The same goes for you, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon told him. "Ona Nobis will have revenge on her mind if she knows you are on Sorrus. Keep a low profile. Do not cause any disturbance. And contact us immediately after you see Astri. Now let's find you some transport."

Chapter Seven

Sorrus was a large planet in a busy system, and it was easy to find a hauler making a direct run. After landing at the capital city of Yinn La Hi, Obi-Wan and Siri thanked the pilot.

"Now we'll have trouble," Obi-Wan said to Siri as they exited the busy landing platform area. "There are no signs in the cities on Sorrus, and we have to find our way to the Med Center."

"Why don't we just ask someone?" Siri asked.

"We won't get very far. Sorrusians don't like strangers."

"You make everything so hard, Obi-Wan," Siri scoffed. "You just have to be polite." She approached a Sorrusian couple, their arms filled with produce from the open-air market.

"Excuse me," Siri said. "Can you tell us where the Med Center is located?"

The couple gave her a blank stare, then moved on, chatting in Sorrusian as if Siri didn't exist.

"That was rude," Siri said. She hailed a young Sorrusian who was strolling by, his hands tucked into his tunic pockets.

"Excuse me. My companion and I are strangers here. We need directions to – "

The young man wheeled about and walked away from them.

"Do you believe me now?" Obi-Wan asked. "Are you sure you were polite enough?"

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"They're positively paranoid," Siri grumbled, running a hand through her hair. "How are we going to find the place?"

"The center should be fairly large, and on a main street," Obi-Wan said, his eyes scanning the street ahead. "And the pilot said he thought it was close to the city center. It should be right around here."

After only a few minutes of quick walking, Obi-Wan and Siri found the complex. Yinn La Hi was a teeming city, and the Med Center was spread out over a large area. Soon it would take up even more space. A new wing was under construction.

"Now we'll have to get someone to tell us where Astri is," Siri observed as they walked through the doors into a gleaming atrium that swarmed with Sorrusians.

"Why don't you try?" Obi-Wan asked. "You did so well earlier."

Siri gave him an irritated glance. Obi-Wan walked ahead to the reception desk.

"I received a message from No Muna that Astri Oddo was brought here for treatment."

The Sorrusian clerk behind the desk said nothing, just continued tapping on the keyboard.

Obi-Wan leaned over the desk in frustration. He spoke clearly and insistently. "My friend is hurt and I must see her!"

The clerk looked up at him warily. "What did you say your name was?"

"Obi-Wan Kenobi."

A spark of recognition lit the clerk's blank gaze. "Ah, I was told to expect you. Please see Medic Rai Unlu. He is waiting for you over there."

Obi-Wan saw a short, slender Sorrusian standing by a pillar. He wore a med smock and carried a small datapad. Obi-Wan and Siri hurried over, and Obi-Wan introduced himself.

"Oh, yes, Astri Oddo. Sad case. We do not know how she received her injuries," the Sorrusian doctor said gravely. "Let me check to see her status." He pressed several keys. "Ah. She has

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regained consciousness. That is a good sign." I must see her," Obi-Wan said.

"Of course. But first you must fill out registry information. All foreigners must do so on Sorrus. You will have to go to Wing A, Level 27, Room 2245X. Astri is in Wing M, at the opposite end of the complex. After you fill out the information, you can ask for directions to her room at the Registry Office."

"Good luck," Siri muttered.

"But that will take too much time!" Obi-Wan objected. "I need to see her now."

"Why don't I fill out the papers while Obi-Wan visits Astri?" Siri suggested. "Would that be all right?"

Rai Unlu looked uncertain. "It is not procedure –"

"I've come so far to see her," Obi-Wan said persuasively. "And she's been badly hurt."

"All right," Rai Unlu said, looking around furtively. "But don't tell anyone. I will take you to Astri. Your companion can follow signs to Wing A. There will be signs to the Registry Office from there."

Siri nodded. "Good luck, Obi-Wan. I will come to Astri's room as soon as I am finished."

Siri strode off, and Rai Unlu beckoned to Obi-Wan. "This way."

Obi-Wan followed him from the soaring atrium through a series of gleaming corridors. They stepped onto a moving ramp and were swept through wing after wing.

At last, Rai Unlu stepped off the ramp at Wing L. "We must walk from here."

They walked quickly through the wing, past the closed doors of the ward. Then they came to a sign that read NO ADMITTANCE.

"Restricted ward for foreigners," Rai Unlu explained, hurrying through.

To Obi-Wan's surprise, they stepped through a doorway into a partially completed hallway. Small graysleds with construction

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materials littered the corridor, and through the open grid-work of the ceiling Obi-Wan saw ducts and wires.

"The Med Center is very crowded. We had to put her in the new wing," Rai Unlu said.

"But it's not finished," Obi-Wan said, stepping over a pail full of rivets.

"She is still getting the best care," Rai Unlu assured him. "Sorrus has the best med facilities in the galaxy."

It was a claim Obi-Wan had heard on other worlds. Had Astri been shuttled to this far wing because she was a stranger? Sorrusians weren't noted for their hospitality, but he expected a more sterile environment.

"She is just through here, third door on your left," Rai Unlu said. "I must return. I have an emergency."

"Wait," Obi-Wan said.

"Sorry, must go," Rai Unlu said. "I'm being signaled. Emergency!"

He turned and almost ran down the hall. Obi-Wan's growing wariness turned to concern. He felt a disturbance in the Force that alarmed him. Prepared for anything now, his hand went to his lightsaber hilt.

Cautiously, he opened the third door on the left. Instead of a private room, he found himself in a partially built hospital ward. There were beams overhead and a durasteel frame. Only two walls had been constructed.

He just had time to see a shadow flicker, nothing more. Obi-Wan stepped back, lightsaber activated, as the bounty hunter Ona Nobis suddenly flew from a beam overhead straight toward him.

Chapter Eight

Obi-Wan had captured her laser whip back on Simpla-12. He was not happy to see that she had replaced it. It danced toward him, an arc of supple, lethal light. He struck out at the whip before it reached him. The two lasers tangled and smoked.

He could not move as fast as Ona Nobis. That, he remembered. He could not defeat her with quickness. She was an astoundingly agile fighter with lightning-fast moves. Her mind was quick as well. She always had surprises up her sleeve.

Cleverness. Acrobatics. Cunning. Flexibility. She had everything he had been taught was important in battle. His adversary did not have the Force, but she might have the advantage.

In this partially enclosed space, he was too vulnerable. He must get out in the open. Obi-Wan drove Ona Nobis back with a furious flurry of moves, forcing her to concentrate on defending herself. When she was slightly off balance he vaulted to the top of the unfinished wall. Balancing for a moment, he leaped down into the construction site.

Here there were obstacles – graysleds, drills, large piles of metal poles, blocks of stone, a durasteel skeleton of the exterior walls of the wing, a deep, muddy pit. Yet he could use them for defense and attack. Here the Force could help him.

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The whip snaked to the top of the wall behind him, curling around an exposed rod. A moment later Ona Nobis used it to haul herself up. Her head swiveled toward him in the black visor she wore to conceal her eyes. Then she leaped down, landing lightly, already furling the whip for another attack.

Her lips curled back from her teeth. "I've been waiting for this," she said.

He was ready. Every sense was alert, every particle of his being focused on the battle ahead. He had to be. The trick was to get her close. From a distance, she used the whip to devastating effect. If he were closer, she would have no room to maneuver.

The perfect attack begins with your attention. Every pebble can be an obstacle or an opportunity. Hone your focus. Add speed, timing, strategy, surprise. Do not forget the Force is with you.

Obi-Wan leaped to his opponent's left side. He used a technique Qui-Gon called "false attack." He knew he would not win with this strategy, but he did not mean to. He wanted to draw her forward toward him.

His lightsaber whirled and blurred as he moved, deflecting her curling whip with its spiked edge. He saw her hand move toward the blaster strapped to her hip and he blocked it with a flurry of moves so fast she had to concentrate to keep up.

The ground was treacherous with mud and debris, but he used the Force to aid every step. He leaped on a pyramid of stone blocks and used the momentum to flip in midair and come at her left. Instead of stepping backward, she stepped forward, an unexpected move for anyone but Ona Nobis.

Good. He had expected it, planned for it.

He twisted in midair, adding momentum to his leap. He landed behind her. Now her back was to a sinkhole filled with mud and water. There was no telling if it was shallow or meters deep.

He drove her relentlessly backward. He saw her lip curl with anger as she flicked the whip, sending it within millimeters of his

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flesh. He slashed downward. The lasers tangled with a buzzing noise.

Suddenly the blaster was in her hand. He had only caught a blur of movement as she reached for it. But he was ready, his lightsaber spinning in a continuous arc to deflect the fire. The Force surged in him, making every movement sure.

But he could not concentrate on everything at once. He lost his connection to the ground. Chips of stone lay around the muddy surface, and they were slippery. His foot slid and he lost his balance. He caught himself before he fell but his loss of concentration cost him.

She moved to his right and charged, firing as she went. Obi-Wan slid on the slippery stones, struggling to regain his footing as he deflected the furious round of fire, twisting his body. He felt the rush of air as the whip snaked around him.

For the first time, he was seriously worried. He was outmatched and he knew it. He did not have Qui-Gon's perfect mastery of the Force. And he could not meet the dual challenge of the whip and the blaster. He could not get close enough to disarm her, and he doubted he would be lucky enough to capture the whip a second time. He had only managed to do so back on Simpla-12 because Astri had barreled down on Ona Nobis in a gravsled.

Doubt is your first enemy. How many times had he heard that in class? Yet he knew deep within that this doubt was justified. With a whip as well as a blaster, she could keep him running while she remained still. Sooner or later he would tire. He saw how much he depended on Qui-Gon during a battle. He could pick up on Qui-Gon's strategy, but he could not formulate it himself. He would put up a good fight, maybe even wound her, if he were lucky to get close enough. But she would win. She knew this territory well and she had set the trap. He had walked right into it.

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All of these calculations roared through Obi-Wan's mind even as he regained his footing and faked a pass at Ona Nobis, forcing her to retreat a few steps. He knew it was a temporary victory.

The hardest decision, Qui-Gon had told him once, *is to walk away*. He had not understood that. Until now. It went against everything he'd learned about battle, everything he was as a Jedi.

Or did it? The mission was his first concern.

Ona Nobis was not part of his mission. As far as they knew, she had no connection to Jenna Zan Arbor now. She had picked a fight solely for revenge.

Which meant there was no reason to fight. Behind Ona Nobis, tall girders framed a wall of the wing. He needed a few seconds, that was all

Concentrating all his will, he reached out a hand toward a fusioncutter lying on the ground. He felt the Force move, and the fusioncutter slid along the mud and then flew with sudden momentum straight toward Ona Nobis.

Surprised, she slashed at it with her whip. Obi-Wan felt the power in his legs as he leaped straight over her head toward the girder above. He landed, slipping just a bit from the mud on his boots. But he knew he would regain his balance. He bent his legs and leaped again, this time to a higher girder.

Far below, the whip snaked toward him. It could not reach him as he leaped to the next high girder. From here, he leapfrogged his way down, out of her reach at the far side of the site. Her howl of rage rang in his ears as he raced away.

Chapter Nine

Siri was waiting for Obi-Wan back in the atrium, her vivid blue eyes snapping with impatience.

"This place is crazy," she said before Obi-Wan could speak. "There is no Wing M. Or if there is, I can't find it, and would you care to make a bet on how helpful the Sorrusians were? Plus, Astri isn't even registered here. I went to Wing A, and they had never heard of her. So then I asked about Rai Unlu. Get this – they've never heard of him, either. Or at least that's what they tell me. I don't know whether they're lying, or I'm trapped in a nightmare." For the first time, Siri noticed Obi-Wan's mud-splattered tunic and dirty face. "Did you fall in a puddle?"

"I had a run-in with Ona Nobis," Obi-Wan said. "This whole thing was a setup. I don't think Astri's here at all. Ona Nobis lured us here to get revenge on me."

"So what happened?" Siri asked, instantly poised for action.

Obi-Wan thought the decision to leave the battle was hard. He hadn't thought ahead to telling Siri. This was harder.

"We fought. I left," he said.

Siri looked incredulous. "You ran away?"

Obi-Wan felt his annoyance rise. Why did Siri have to put it that way? He struggled not to let his anger show. The best way to tell her what happened was not to offer excuses.

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"I was outmatched this time." The words seemed to come out smoothly, but they felt as though they'd been torn from his throat.

Siri opened her mouth, then snapped it shut. Obviously, there were many things she wanted to say. Just as obviously, Adi had taught her well. For once, she kept her thoughts to herself.

Yet the expression on her face spoke more clearly than anything she could have said. Siri could not understand leaving the scene of a battle. She could not imagine a situation in which she would give up. She had not been in as many battles as Obi-Wan. She was more used to the training rooms at the Temple, where she had usually been the winner. When she had lost, she had bowed to her opponent with grace. Then she beat them in the next encounter.

She did not yet realize that even for the best Jedi, there were battles that could not be won. Qui-Gon had taught Obi-Wan that. As skilled a fighter as he was, Qui-Gon knew that surprises in battle came often. You could train for them, but you could not predict them. Sometimes you had to cut your losses.

He wanted to tell Siri this, but Siri would not listen. She liked to find things out her own way. And you did not go to her for a sympathetic ear.

"We'd better contact Qui-Gon and Adi," Obi-Wan said, turning away.

They found a secluded place to talk in the gardens in the center of the med complex. Qui-Gon's calm voice came through the comlink, and Obi-Wan quickly described what had occurred.

There was a pause. "You did well, Padawan," Qui-Gon said. Obi-Wan felt some of the tension inside his body uncurl. Qui-Gon understood his decision, at least. "Ona Nobis is only a distraction for us now. But this news distresses me. Astri has not checked in with Tahl. If Ona Nobis used her as a lure, that means she must know that Astri is on Sorrus. She must know where she is."

"Siri and I can look for her – "

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"No," Qui-Gon interrupted. "Hard as it is, I must agree with Tahl. Astri has made her own decision. She has not asked for our help." "But –"

"Obi-Wan, listen to me. Do nothing. Tahl, Adi, and I will discuss this. You and Siri return to the Temple immediately."

It was Qui-Gon's sternest voice. Obi-Wan tucked his comlink back into his belt. Reluctantly, he turned to Siri. "We'll be able to hitch a ride from the main landing platform."

She nodded. She was silent on the walk back to the landing platform. Obi-Wan did not know what to say, either. He and Siri had formed a bond during their adventure on Kegan. He had liked her spirit and humor and had depended on her courage. Obviously, they still had a distance to travel before they became real friends. He felt a sudden sharp ache for his friend Bant, who would never let him feel like a coward for leaving the scene of a battle. She would trust his judgment. Siri only trusted her own.

When they got to the landing platform, Obi-Wan looked for a hauler on a direct run to Coruscant. The first pilot he approached refused, but pointed to another pilot nearby.

"Donny Buc is about to make a run. He'll probably let you hitch a ride. He's been laid up for repairs for a day, but he's ready to roll."

Obi-Wan saw a pilot squatting near his ship, drinking a carton of muja juice. He signaled to Siri and approached him.

"Sure, I can always find room for Jedi," the pilot said. "Are you ready to leave now?"

"Yes." Obi-Wan had a sudden impulse. "By any chance, has someone else tried to hitch a ride earlier today? She's tall and has a shaved head –"

"Sure, I remember her," the pilot said, taking a last gulp of juice. He wore a tattered leather helmet and sported a short black beard. "Her and some of her friends were looking for transport to the far desert."

"Friends?" Obi-Wan asked, puzzled.

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"Three of them," the pilot said. "They kept quarreling about how much they were willing to pay. Wouldn't listen to a word the girl said."

Obi-Wan closed his eyes. "Their names wouldn't be Cholly, Weez, and Tup, by any chance?"

"That was them!" the pilot chortled. "What a bunch of chuckleheads."

"Did you transport them to Arra?" Obi-Wan asked. That was no doubt where she was headed.

He shook his head. "Couldn't swing it, I had repairs to wait for. I told them to take an air taxi. Saw them heading toward the taxi platform."

Obi-Wan drew Siri aside. "Now we can be pretty sure that Astri is here. We've got to check this out. It won't take long. If this pilot will take us to Arra first, we can pick up Astri and bring her back with us to the Temple."

"But Qui-Gon and Adi want us to return immediately."

"That was before we knew for sure that Astri was here," Obi-Wan argued. "We know that Ona Nobis is here in the capital city, so we won't be in danger. We can swing by, pick up Astri, and head straight for the Temple."

Siri shook her head. "We are wasting time, Obi-Wan. I don't understand why we had to rescue Astri in the first place. Why is Qui-Gon bending the rules for this girl? She isn't a Jedi. She can't lead us to Jenna Zan Arbor. This is a distraction."

"She needs us," Obi-Wan said. "Qui-Gon has known her since she was a child. If she is in danger and we can help, we must. Your Master sent you here to Sorrus, just as much as Qui-Gon did."

Siri gave him a stony glance. "Adi did not want to. She went along with Qui-Gon out of loyalty."

"Then you should do the same for me."

Siri said nothing for a long moment. She squinted into the distance, as if counting the tall buildings in Yinn La Hi. "All

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right," she said finally. "But we must not delay more than a few hours."

Obi-Wan quickly made a deal with the pilot.

"All right. It's only a little out of my way," the pilot said. "I wouldn't want your friend to get herself in trouble."

They boarded the transport and took off. Obi-Wan's impatience made the flight seem to last forever. As the pilot slowed the engines and began landing procedures, a blinking warning light suddenly lit on the panel.

"Well, eclipse my moon, there's that same problem," he said, hitting the panel with an angry fist. "That mechanic didn't fix my problem after all. Maybe I shouldn't have bought that discount part. I'm going to have to drop you and head back to Yinn."

"But we have to get to Coruscant!" Siri exclaimed.

"Well, you can come back with me, if you want," Donny Buc said genially, slowing the engines further. "Don't worry, we'll make it back to the landing platform. Should be a couple of hours, that's all."

Siri groaned in frustration. "I don't believe this! We could have been halfway to Coruscant by now."

"Sorry, little girl," Buc said cheerfully. "The hyperdrive's busted. Lucky we made this detour so I can get back to the mechanic. You could hitch another ride from Yinn, I guess. But nobody else was making a run near Coruscant today."

Siri bristled at being called "little girl." "I don't like any of these options."

"It will only mean a few hours delay," Obi-Wan said.

"Maybe less," Buc said, shrugging.

"We might as well get off here," Obi-Wan said to Siri. "We can look for Astri while we wait. You've come this far."

Siri pressed her lips together. She gave a short, angry nod.

"All right, drop us here," he told Donny Buc. "We'll be at the landing platform in two hours."

"Make it an hour and a half. I feel lucky."

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Donny Buc swooped in for a bumpy landing. They scrambled off the craft and he made a wobbly takeoff back to Yinn.

Siri and Obi-Wan were hit with a blast of hot wind.

"All I can say is, he'd better come back," Siri grumbled.

Obi-Wan led the way through the sand. He was grateful to Siri for agreeing to stop. She may have been disdainful of him back at the Med Center, she might be angry now, but one thing he could say about Siri – she was loyal.

They struck out over the dunes. Obi-Wan saw no sign of the tribe or Astri with her three companions. But up ahead, he caught the glint of metal.

"Siri, look."

She shaded her eyes with her hand. "It's an air taxi," she said. "Come on."

They ran ahead, the sand sucking at their footsteps.

The air taxi was settled into the sand, but did not appear to have crashed. As they got closer, Obi-Wan saw a bundle of clothing in the front seat.

His heartbeat tripped. It was not a bundle of clothes. It was a pilot. He'd been strangled.

Chapter Ten

Barely breathing, Obi-Wan walked closer to search the rest of the ship. He braced himself for the sight of Astri's lifeless body. But how could you brace yourself for something like that?

The air taxi was empty except for the pilot.

"What should we do, Obi-Wan?" Siri asked in a hushed voice. She anxiously scanned the area around them. "Do you think Ona Nobis killed the pilot?"

"I have no doubt of it."

"What do you think happened to Astri? Do you think..."

"I don't know," Obi-Wan said uneasily. "Maybe she's hiding. Is there anywhere you can think to look?"

"Yes," Obi-Wan said. He tried to ignore the foreboding that was gathering inside him.

"There is one place. When Astri and I were here, the local tribe led us to the bounty hunter's hideout."

He led Siri along the sheer rock wall that circled the canyon. When he got to a sharp turning, he stopped.

"Put your hood up," he advised. "The wind will get very strong after we turn the corner. Whatever you do, don't lose sight of me."

Siri nodded, drawing her hood over her face. He did the same.

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They turned the corner into a howling wind. Pellets of sand peppered any exposed skin. Obi-Wan kept one hand on the wall so that he would not get lost. He could only see a meter or two ahead.

He dropped to his knees, motioning to Siri to follow. His fingers trailed along the rock, looking for the opening to the bounty hunter's hideout.

It was a relief to enter the narrow opening of the cave. He could not stand, but the cool sand under his fingers felt good. He shook out his cloak and brushed the sand from his face and hair.

"The cave opens up just ahead. We'll be able to stand," he told Siri in a whisper. He was fairly sure that Ona Nobis wasn't here, but he was prepared to meet her if she was. This time, he would have Siri by his side.

He crawled along the cool, damp sand, feeling his way in the darkness. He saw the small opening ahead and squeezed through. Immediately the air felt different and he knew he was in a larger open space. The blackness turned gray. He waited a moment, then lit his glow rod.

Astri sat against one wall with Cholly, Weez, and Tup. They were tethered together, their wrists and ankles tightly bound. Gags were stuffed in their mouths. Astri's eyes went wide.

"Don't worry, it's me," Obi-Wan called, in case they had trouble seeing him.

"Mmmmmfff!" Astri struggled against the gag. Cholly beat his feet on the floor of the cave.

"All right, I'm coming," Obi-Wan said, hurrying toward them. He reached toward Astri's gag even as she attempted to talk.

"Trap!" Astri exhaled the word as Obi-Wan removed the gag.

"Wh – " Obi-Wan's question was cut off as he heard a loud rushing noise behind him.

He turned and ran past Siri to the opening. He dropped flat and pushed forward, but it was too late. Sand and rocks were pouring down from overhead, piling up against the cave entrance. There was nothing he could do. Larger rocks spilled

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down, wedging in against one another tightly. In only moments, the cave opening was sealed and they were buried alive.

Chapter Eleven

Obi-Wan crawled back into the larger cave. He wiped the dust out of his eyes and reached for his comlink.

It didn't work.

"Siri?"

She shook her head. "Mine doesn't work, either."

Astri ran her hands over the stubble that was beginning to grow back on her bare skull. "I'm sorry, Obi-Wan. She left us here to die, but she was hoping you'd find us. When you crawled through, you tripped a slow-acting lever that deposited all that debris."

Obi-Wan nodded. He felt foolish for once again walking into a trap. He had never told Qui-Gon about Ona Nobis's hideout. There hadn't been time. He had told Tahl, but he hadn't given her coordinates. Everything had happened too fast. And now no one knew where they were.

Siri had freed Cholly, Weez, and Tup. Tup groaned as he stretched his legs. "I'm so hungry."

"You won't be for long," Weez said.

Tup brightened. "There's food?"

"No, idiot. Because soon we'll be dead," Weez snarled.

Tup paled. "You don't have to be so negative. Woosh. We're with Jedi. They can do anything."

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Cholly had crawled forward to peer through the opening to the cave- in. "They can't tunnel through a rock," he said.

"You're not dead yet," Siri told them. "Come on, Obi-Wan, let's see if we can cut through those rocks with our lightsabers."

Obi-Wan followed Siri back into the narrow portion of the cave. They crawled forward. There was just enough room to crouch side by side. They activated their lightsabers and sliced through the rocks.

The rocks crumbled into sand, which filled up the spaces, packing the landslide even tighter.

"This isn't going to work," Obi-Wan said. He sat back and deactivated his lightsaber. He wiped the dirt off his face with his sleeve. "Now you get to say 'I told you so.'"

Siri sat down beside him. She dusted the sand off her tunic with her hands. "If you say that again," she muttered, "I'll hit you. There's got to be another way. Maybe she has tools in the cave."

"I'm sure she removed them. Ona Nobis plans for everything."

With a grunt, Siri flipped over and began to crawl back to the cave. "Maybe she doesn't know it's a tool."

Intrigued, Obi-Wan crawled behind her. They stood upright as soon as they reached the big cave. Siri found two more glow rods and lit them. They prowled around the cave, pawing through the bins in which Ona Nobis kept survival gear and protein packs.

"Can I help?" Astri asked. "What are we looking for?"

"Tools," Obi-Wan said. "Something to dig with."

Astri sighed. "Ona Nobis hauled out a bin of tools when she left. She didn't leave anything. Not food or water, either."

Siri sat back on her haunches. "We can't dig with our hands. We'll never get out."

A slight whimper from Tup ended in a howl as Cholly kicked him.

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Siri's eyes roamed over the cave. Suddenly, she raised her glow rod. She rose to her feet in one quick motion and went over to study the wall of the cave.

"Obi-Wan, look."

Obi-Wan stood at Siri's shoulder. He saw that the cave walls were braced with slender metal poles.

"Do you think the cave would collapse if we cut a few of these down?" Siri asked.

Another moan from Tup. This time, Weez joined him.

Astri came closer. She gazed around the cave, noting the number of supports. "I'm no engineer, but I bet you can take some of these out."

"You'd *bet*?" Tup asked. "Aren't you sure?"

"I can't be sure," Astri said. "But if it's our only chance, it's worth the risk, isn't it?"

"No," Tup said in a small voice.

Astri turned to Siri. "What are you thinking of doing with them?"

"They're shiny," Siri said. "And they look pretty flexible. I'm thinking if we can get them through the rocks and sand, we can signal the outside."

Cholly looked dumbfounded. "What outside? It's just desert out there! "

"There's a tribe nearby," Astri said. "They scavenge for food. Someone might see it."

"Or someone could come looking for us," Obi-Wan said.

"Or the whole cave could collapse on our heads," Tup suggested. His hands fluttered down as he mimicked the cave ceiling falling on them. "Woosh."

"I guess we should take a vote," Obi-Wan said. He looked at Siri and Astri, who nodded immediately. Cholly followed with a nervous nod. Weez agreed with a shrug. Then he elbowed Tup.

"I guess it's better than starving to death," Tup said shakily.

Siri gritted her teeth. She activated her lightsaber and carefully began to slice through the slender metal pole. It peeled back

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from the wall and Obi-Wan stepped forward to grab it. A stream of dirt rained down on his head, and Tup fell to his knees and covered his head with his hands.

"Gibbertz and ham, we're done for!"

The stream of dirt stopped. Obi-Wan scrutinized the ceiling above. "It's all right," he said. "I think it will hold."

"He *thinks*," Tup repeated.

"Shut up, Tup!" Weez and Cholly yelled. Another stream of sand poured down.

"Come on, Obi-Wan," Siri said. "Let's see if we can push this through."

They wiggled through the opening and crawled forward. It took trial and error, but first Obi-Wan, then Siri threaded the slender pole through crevices in the rocks. Siri hit a rock and wiggled the rod, trying to force it through. The rod snapped.

"We'll have to try another," Siri said.

This time, Tup rolled into a ball and kept his eyes closed as Obi-Wan sliced through the second pole. He eased it away from the wall and had to jump back as a chunk of loose dirt and rocks cascaded down. They heard a rumble overhead.

"Don't say a word, Tup," Astri snapped.

Siri and Obi-Wan went back to the cave entrance and tried again. He tried to guide the rod through the tiniest of cracks. He pushed, pulled, prodded, and maneuvered but he got no further. Sweat streaked through the dust on his face. His gaze locked with Siri's. An unspoken agreement passed between them. This time he closed his eyes as he gently moved the rod. Together they called on the Force. He felt it gather power around him. The sand and rocks were part of him. They were connected to everything around him. He could feel the tiny rivers of space through the packed debris.

Obi-Wan maneuvered the rod carefully. He felt it poke through. He wiggled it.

"I think it's out in the air now."

"Good. Push it out as far as you can," Siri breathed.

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Slowly, Obi-Wan pushed the rod through until he only held the very end. He wiggled it.

"Maybe if the wind dies down, the sun will glint on it," Siri said.

Obi-Wan wasn't sure if the wind ever died down in that canyon, but he didn't tell Siri that.

For the next few hours they all took turns crawling through the narrow cave and holding the rod. They turned and twisted it carefully, in case it could catch a ray of sun.

The group split Obi-Wan and Siri's survival rations, but it did little to assuage their hunger and thirst. The air grew close and hot. They barely spoke or moved in order to conserve what little oxygen they had left.

When Obi-Wan's turn came again, he took the rod from a weary Tup. He lay flat and wiggled the metal. He was tired from the rescue of Qui-Gon and the battle with Ona Nobis. He could not remember the last time he had slept. But he would lie here and stay alert as long as he had to. As long as there was hope

"Hello in there! Is anyone there?"

"Yes! We're trapped!" Obi-Wan shouted. "I am Goq Cranna. Who is there?"

"Goq Cranna, it is Obi-Wan Kenobi! I am the Jedi who visited your tribe and asked for your help!"

"Ah, then it is good I stopped. Stay back, young Kenobi. We will dig you out."

Obi-Wan crawled back into the cave. Siri, Astri, Cholly, Weez, and Tup sat propped against the cave wall, exhausted.

"Goq Cranna has found us!" Obi-Wan said. "He's digging us out."

"Thank the stars and planets," Tup said fervently.

It seemed to take a long time for Goq to dig out the opening. At last light streamed in and they saw the smiling face of Goq's son, Bhu.

They crawled out of the cave into the orange blaze of sunset.

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"The wind dies down at dusk, or else we would not have seen the silver rod," Goq said. "Even though we were searching. We saw the dead pilot and knew Ona Nobis had been here. We went into hiding. But then when we emerged we met a pilot who was supposed to pick up two passengers at the landing platform. They didn't show up. Bhu said, what if the wonderful lady who saved our tribe is in danger? So I agreed to look. Bhu saved you."

Bhu smiled shyly at Astri, who hugged him. "Thank you, Bhu."

On their last trip, Astri had made a trade with

Bhu for information about Ona Nobis. She had taught the desert tribe how to find food in the harsh environment. It was obvious that Bhu now worshiped her.

Siri combed her hair behind her ears with her fingers, shaking out the sand. "Did you actually see Ona Nobis?"

"Close enough to touch," Goq told her. "I was nearby when she called someone on her corn-link. Someone was trying to persuade her to do something and offered her a cut of a potential fortune if she did so."

"Did you hear if she accepted, or where she is headed?" Obi-Wan asked urgently.

"I merely heard stray words," Goq said. A look of blankness had come over his face. Obi-Wan recognized it. It was the look of a Sorrusian who did not want to get mixed up in a stranger's business. Obi-Wan shot a glance at Astri.

"Surely you picked up some indication of what she was up to," Astri said gently, her hand still on Bhu's shoulder.

Goq's eyes warmed as he looked at Astri and his son. Astri had saved his tribe. For that, he would overcome his Sorrusian instinct for self-preservation at all costs.

"I do know where she is headed, wonderful lady. Belasco."

Obi-Wan stood on the landing platform of Arra. The sunsets were long on Sorrus, and the sky was still ablaze with orange and yellow. He had just concluded a difficult conversation with Qui-

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Gon. It had not been easy to tell his Master that contrary to orders he had stopped in the desert before heading to Coruscant.

Now he waited out Qui-Gon's silence.

At last the Jedi spoke. "You were told to come straight to Coruscant. "

"The stop, we felt, would have been quick. And I had a strong feeling that Astri was in danger."

"The stop was not quick, and you put yourself and Siri in danger as well."

"And now we know that Ona Nobis is headed to Belasco. It is the home planet of Senator Uta S'orn! She was Jenna Zan Arbor's only friend. This can't be a coincidence. Uta S'orn could be in great danger. We should go there immediately!"

Another long silence. "Adi and I are disappointed in both of you. We will discuss this later. For now, we will meet you on Belasco."

Chapter Twelve

Qui-Gon gazed through the cockpit of the consular ship that was ferrying the Jedi to Belasco. From high above, the capital city of Senta glowed. It had been built centuries before out of native rose-colored stone. It was a spectacular sight, crowning the golden hills that surrounded a sea of sparkling blue.

Casually, he stretched his arms and legs, testing his strength. His continuing weakness dismayed him. He knew he had not given his body a chance to recover. But he was driven on by his fierce desire to bring Jenna Zan Arbor to justice. He was the one who knew firsthand how her mind worked. He could not leave this mission to others.

"Do you feel you are regaining your strength?" Adi asked politely. He knew she would not ask such a personal question if she were not concerned.

"Yes," he said shortly. He liked and respected Adi, but he did not wish to tell her his concerns. He hoped that would be the end of the subject.

He should have known better. Adi was not one to pry. But when she wanted a true answer, she did not give up.

"I noticed that your connection to the Force was a bit weak back at the lab," Adi said. "I would not wish you to return to the Temple, or ask you to do so. But..." Adi turned her face to look

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at him directly. Qui-Gon was forced to meet her dark, commanding gaze. She was almost as intimidating as Mace Windu when she wanted to be.

"I just want things clear between us," she continued. "Here is what I see. You are pretending to have made a full recovery, but you have not. You compensate for your weakness by demonstrating your strength in strategy and decision-making. You should have consulted me before ordering Siri and Obi-Wan to Sorrus, Qui-Gon. I am your comrade. Not your enemy. If you have weakness, I should be aware of it."

Adi didn't let anything slide. Qui-Gon knew he had overstepped. He should have consulted his fellow Jedi Master before issuing the order.

"I'm sorry," he said. He did not find it hard to apologize when he knew he was wrong. That didn't mean he enjoyed it. "You are right on all counts. My connection to the Force has weakened along with my body."

"All right. Now I know." Adi turned to look out the cockpit windshield. "The landing platform is crowded. I don't see our Padawans."

"They had better be there," Qui-Gon said. He was still irritated that Obi-Wan had made the stop in the desert of Arra without consulting him. "Unless they decided to go off on their own mission again."

Adi gave one of her rare smiles. "They did well, and you know it."

Qui-Gon frowned. "They disobeyed."

"They had reason."

"They did not contact us."

"They are learning independence."

"At a cost of disobedience?"

Adi leaned back. "You know the Jedi look at things differently, Qui-Gon. We are not an army. Our discipline comes from within. Each Jedi has his or her own connection to the Force. We all are taught to trust our feelings and hone our

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instincts. Obi-Wan had a strong feeling and followed it. Siri backed him up. You did the same on Kegan, and I backed up your instinct – even though you did not ask my opinion. I am pleased that Siri is learning cooperation. Perhaps Obi-Wan has taught her more about it than I can."

"Obi-Wan is usually cautious," Qui-Gon said as the ship began landing procedures. "Yet sometimes he is swept away by feeling. I worry about those times."

"As the Council worries about you," Adi said in an amused tone. "You and Obi-Wan seem so different. But at the core you are very alike."

"Perhaps that is not good," Qui-Gon mused. As the craft descended, he could just make out Obi-Wan standing, waiting for him.

Adi looked down at Siri, who was standing next to Obi-Wan. "It is the same for me. I see Siri's defiance and independence and see myself. In guiding her I guide myself. It is good that this is so."

Qui-Gon felt her words strike his heart. Obi-Wan's face was upturned now, his expression anxious. Being a Master was difficult for Qui-Gon. Pride in his Padawan battled with the need to be stern. He saw so much potential in Obi-Wan. He wanted to mold this being into a better Jedi than he was himself. He was impatient with himself as often as he was impatient with Obi-Wan. He saw that Adi was right: When he was stern with Obi-Wan, it was sometimes because he saw his own mistakes in the boy.

The consular ship slid into a narrow space among larger vessels. Adi turned to the pilot. "We do not know how long we will be on Belasco, but we might need to leave quickly."

"I will be on alert, waiting for your signal."

The landing ramp was activated, and Qui-Gon and Adi walked down to their Padawans.

Siri and Obi-Wan faced them, their gazes expectant. They awaited whatever their Masters might say.

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Qui-Gon strode forward "Next time, contact me first," he told Obi-Wan.

Adi spoke to Siri quietly so that the other Jedi could not hear. She preferred to give her Padawan instructions privately when she could. Then she turned back to Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan.

"I would say that our first step is to warn Uta S'orn that she could be in danger," she said. "I think we all agree that if Ona Nobis is here, Jenna Zan Arbor must have been the one who summoned her. And the fact that Zan Arbor picked her old friend's home planet can't be a coincidence. She must be planning to contact Uta S'orn."

"We have no proof to bring to Senator S'orn, only suspicion," Qui-Gon said. "But we owe her that, at least."

"We've learned that because of her years of service, she has been granted a home in the palace on the old royal grounds," Obi-Wan told them.

Qui-Gon nodded. "Then let us head there. But first, where is Astri?"

"She was nervous about seeing you," Obi-Wan said. "She feels badly that she put Siri and me in danger."

Qui-Gon glanced around. Amid the throngs of people standing on the landing platform, he glimpsed Astri standing next to the departure checkpoint area. A long line of Belascans snaked around her.

He walked closer. Astri looked thinner and more muscular, and her shaved head gave her a fierce appearance. She did not look like the soft, pretty girl he had known. But her eyes were the same, clear and honest. Right now they were filled with uneasiness.

"I'm so sorry," she said. "I did not think Obi-Wan would follow me. I would not ask for more help from the Jedi. You have done so much for me already –"

"All of which we were happy to do," Qui-Gon said. "And Obi-Wan's decision was his decision. But I am concerned, Astri. Didi is recovering quickly. He will find new investors for a new

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business. You must know this. Why are you still chasing Ona Nobis? I do not think it is because of the reward."

Her warm gaze grew hard. "She shot him as though he were nothing, just something in her way."

"Yes. She feels nothing for living beings. But revenge makes one careless," Qui-Gon said. "Leave Ona Nobis to us."

She shook her head stubbornly. "I can't."

Annoyed, Qui-Gon fell silent. He could not control Astri's behavior. She was a distraction to the mission, but he could not allow her to go off alone. He was too close to her father and cared too much for her to watch her walk off into danger.

Qui-Gon sighed. "I have no right to tell you what to do."

"Now we agree," Astri said cheerfully.

"But I have a right to make a request," Qui-Gon added.

She looked at him warily.

"Remain with our party for the time being. Ona Nobis is here on Belasco. Either we will find her, or she will find us. You will learn more with us than without us."

Hesitantly, Astri nodded. "All right. I thank you."

"If you persist, I cannot protect you," Qui-Gon warned. "But at least I'd like you near."

Obi-Wan walked up. "Adi is feeling a disturbance in the Force."

Qui-Gon hid his dismay. He had not felt anything.

"All right," he said shortly. "Come, Astri." "What about my friends?" Astri asked.

Obi-Wan glanced over. He saw Cholly, Weez, and Tup trying to make themselves inconspicuous nearby.

Qui-Gon frowned. "After years of disapproval of your father's friends, now you consort with criminals?"

One corner of Astri's mouth lifted. "They are not competent enough to be criminals. And I'm almost growing fond of them."

With a sigh, Qui-Gon beckoned to Cholly, Weez, and Tup. The trio came forward uneasily. "It appears that we are stuck with you," Obi-Wan told them.

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"It is usually our policy to run away from trouble," Cholly said. "So don't worry."

The group headed over to Adi and Siri.

"Something is wrong, Qui-Gon," Adi told him in a low voice. "I'm feeling desperation and fear here. Look at the departure checkpoint."

Qui-Gon's keen gaze swept the Belascans in line. Now that Adi had alerted him, he felt what he should have known all along – a rippling disturbance in the Force. But he did not need the Force to alert him to the fear on the faces of the Belascans.

"You are right," he said.

"And this landing platform is extraordinarily busy."

"Everyone seems to be leaving, not arriving," Siri observed.

"Let's walk a few blocks into the city," Adi suggested. "Maybe we'll pick up on what is wrong."

They took the turbolift down from the main landing platform to the city streets below.

"We did not have time to do much research on Belasco," Adi said. "Here is what we know. This is a wealthy world with a rigid class system. The planet was once ruled by a royal family, but now a Leader is elected, who then elects his own Council. Senators are greatly revered."

"And Uta S'orn is a favorite of the current Leader, Min K'atel," Obi-Wan said.

"Look," Qui-Gon pointed out. "There are clinics set up on almost every block. They look temporary. Maybe a sudden illness has infected the population. There aren't many people on the streets."

An elder Belascan sat nearby on his front stoop, his hands dangling between his knees, a lost look on his face. He wore the distinctive elaborate headwrapping of the Belascan people, but two loose ends of fabric trailed over his shoulders as though he'd lost interest halfway through the task. Adi walked closer.

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"I'm sorry to disturb you," she said gently. "We have only just arrived on your world. We sense that something is very wrong here."

"Very wrong." The handsome elder turned a bleak gaze on them. "Have you not heard? Our water supply is contaminated."

"We have not heard. You get your water supply from your Great Sea, do you not?" Adi asked.

He nodded. "It is run through the desalinization tanks and provides us all with drinking water. Every seven years, a naturally occurring bacteria invades. We prepare for this. We know how to contain it, and we stockpile water for our use while the scientists control the bacteria. This year, they could not control it. It has multiplied and spread. But not before it took the lives of many elders and children. Among them my granddaughter."

"I am so sorry," Adi said. She bent down slightly to give the man a brief touch on the arm. Underneath Adi's regal manner, her intuitive nature gave her insight into suffering.

"I am not alone," the Belascan continued. His bleak gaze swept the empty street. "Many are ill on Belasco. Even the Leader's own daughter. Most of the ill are children and elders. The Leader has set up med wards on the royal grounds. But every day there are more funerals. Even while all our scientists work to contain the bacteria, we are running out of water. And running out of time."

Adi bid the elder good-bye and turned to the others. "This news is distressing. It can't be a coincidence."

"Jenna Zan Arbor must be behind this," Qui-Gon said grimly. "She has done this before, introduced a virus or bacteria into a population in order to rush in at the last moment and save it."

"We'd better get to the royal grounds," Adi said.

Hurrying now, they followed the curving streets to the palace, which was visible on the main hill of the city. The palace gates stood open to all so that the population could enjoy the gardens. As they walked through they could see that large temporary domes had been set up on the wide lawns surrounding the

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sprawling rosy palace. Medics walked rapidly by them, and some children sat on benches nearby. They wore white robes, and their thin faces were turned toward the sun.

Adi looked shaken. "If Zan Arbor is responsible, this is monstrous."

"Could she deliberately make all these children sick?" Siri asked.

"I'm afraid she could," Qui-Gon said.

Tup swallowed. "If she could do this to kids, imagine what she would have done to *us*."

They asked a medic for Uta S'orn's whereabouts, and he pointed them to a garden at the back of one of the Ward Domes. They found S'orn sitting on a bench, watching over a group of children. Instead of her usual jeweled head-wrapping, she wore one of fine white linen. A small girl with dark curls sat in her lap.

Uta S'orn was speaking to the girl with a smile on her face, but it faded when she saw the Jedi.

"This is a surprise," she said to Qui-Gon. She gave a disdainful glance to Astri, Cholly, Weez, and Tup. "Is this your new entourage?"

The little girl shrank shyly back against Uta S'orn's lap. Qui-Gon crouched down and smiled gently at her.

"And who are you?"

"Joli K'atel," she said, and added confidently, "I'm sick."

"I am very sorry to hear that. But I'm sure you will be well again."

She nodded. "My father says it is so."

"Then it is so," Qui-Gon said gravely.

Uta S'orn gently eased the girl off her lap and gave her a gentle pat. "Go sit with the others, Joli. I need to speak to these people. Unfortunately."

The little girl wandered off, the sash of her robe trailing in the grass. Uta S'orn's face was creased with worry as she watched her.

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"I have volunteered as a med aide," she said quietly. "I thought I could help. I did not know it would break my heart."

"Is that the Leader's daughter?" Adi asked.

"Yes. But she is no more important than all of these children," Uta S'orn said, waving her hand to take in the Ward Domes. "They are our future. We must save them." She turned to them. "What is it that you want? As you can see, I am busy. Why are you here? It seems I cannot get away from the Jedi."

"We have reason to believe that Jenna Zan Arbor – " Qui-Gon began.

She stood up angrily. "Not this again. You have told me what you believe about my former friend. I have not heard from her, nor do I wish to. She has nothing to do with me."

"But we think that she does," Adi said. "We think that she is here, on Belasco. We're not sure why. There could be some link that we are overlooking, some reason she needs to contact you again."

"But she hasn't," Uta S'orn said impatiently. "And I will not see her if she tries. All right?"

"She might insist," Qui-Gon said. "And she can. Ona Nobis is here as well. She has kidnapped and killed for Jenna Zan Arbor before."

"If you're trying to frighten me, it isn't working," Uta S'orn said dismissively. "I have no time to worry about phantom threats. My world is dying. I see now there was a reason I returned here."

"We are merely trying to protect you – "

"No need. I am safe here. Although we have no king, the royal droid guards still protect the Leader and everyone on the grounds. Thank you for your concern, but Ona Nobis cannot get to me here. Now if you'll excuse me, there are sick children to tend."

Uta S'orn walked away.

"I guess she has a point," Siri said, glancing around at the busy grounds as medics walked by and guard droids, their shells

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polished to a golden gleam, patrolled. "It would be hard for Ona Nobis to get to her here."

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan exchanged a glance. "I'm afraid, Siri, that in our experience," Qui-Gon said, "Ona Nobis can get anywhere."

Chapter Thirteen

"Why didn't you tell Uta S'orn that we suspect Jenna Zan Arbor has engineered the bacteria explosion?" Obi-Wan asked Qui-Gon as they left the royal grounds.

"Because we have no proof, only our suspicions," Qui-Gon said. "She would not believe us. She doesn't even believe that Zan Arbor is here."

"Nevertheless, she will take care, just in case," Adi said. "Despite what she said, she is afraid of Ona Nobis."

"We have to get proof," Qui-Gon said.

"I'm confused," Siri admitted. "I don't understand why Zan Arbor would come to Belasco at all."

"We know that Zan Arbor killed Uta S'orn's son. Uta S'orn knows it, too. But Zan Arbor doesn't know that she knows – as far as she's concerned, Uta S'orn is still an old friend," Adi explained. "Perhaps Zan Arbor came here because S'orn is a powerful ally, and she needs her help."

"That could be," Qui-Gon said, nodding. "And Zan Arbor feels she still needs the protection of Ona Nobis as well. She knows we will be pursuing her. Yes, I think Zan Arbor will contact Uta S'orn. But we must convince S'orn that Zan Arbor is here. Let's go back to the landing platform. If we can prove that Zan Arbor landed on Belasco, Uta S'orn might listen. In the

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meantime, even if Zan Arbor used an alias, we should be able to track her."

"How can I help?" Astri asked.

"The royal grounds are open to all," Qui-Gon said. "And those guard droids seem to have a mostly ceremonial function. Someone needs to stay there and watch Uta S'orn. Ona Nobis could show up at anytime."

"We can do that," Astri said, with a glance at Cholly, Weez, and Tup.

"Do not approach her," Qui-Gon warned. "And remember – your best revenge is to bring Ona Nobis to justice. We can do this for you. Then you can collect your reward."

"That sounds like an excellent plan!" Tup beamed.

"I don't care about the reward," Astri said. "Only about her capture. "

"Don't be so hasty," Cholly said.

Astri, Cholly, Weez, and Tup turned away from the group to start back toward the royal grounds.

"You're placing quite a bit of faith in them," Adi observed.

"Not really," Qui-Gon said. "I'm counting on Cholly, Weez, and Tup to be obvious. Ona Nobis might steer clear of Uta S'orn for a time if she knows they are watching. That will give us time to gather evidence that Zan Arbor is behind the poisoning of the water supply."

Obi-Wan's senses suddenly went on alert. Even while he was walking, he had been watching every shadow. After his last encounter with Ona Nobis, he was taking no chances. He had sensed a sudden movement nearby and realized that someone was following Astri.

He signaled Qui-Gon with a quick glance and melted away from the others. He ducked back into an alley and scanned the street behind. Whoever was following the group was moving quickly from one shadow to another.

Using his cable launcher, Obi-Wan swung himself up to the flat roof overhead. He ran lightly across the roof. When he

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reached the corner he stopped and waited for his target below to catch up. Then he leaped down, aiming to land directly in front.

To his surprise, he found himself face-to-face with Fligh. He was the thief back on Coruscant who had stolen Zan Arbor's datapad and given it to Astri, inadvertently plunging Astri and Didi into danger. Fligh was wearing an eye patch and a stunned expression.

Obi-Wan was just as stunned as Fligh. Qui-Gon, Adi, and Siri ran up to them quickly.

"Fligh?" Obi-Wan said. "I thought you were dead. I saw your body on Coruscant."

"No, you didn't, Padawan," Qui-Gon said. "But you did," Obi-Wan said, confused. "No," Qui-Gon said. "I saw a body that resembled Fligh. I had my doubts."

"Ah," Fligh said. His face was naturally mournful, with a downturned mouth and sad eyes. "I've never been clever enough to fool a Jedi. Never will."

"What are you doing here now?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Following Astri, of course," Fligh answered. "I thought I owed Didi. Even though I keep losing her, I am doing my best, which isn't much. But there you go."

Siri sidled closer to Obi-Wan. "What's going on?" she whispered. "Who is this character?"

"Fligh is a friend of Didi's back on Coruscant," Obi-Wan explained quickly. "He's the one who stole the datapads of Jenna Zan Arbor and Uta

S'orn in the Senate building. Then he was murdered. Or so I thought."

"He looks pretty healthy to me," Siri observed.

"Hey, I lost my eye!" Fligh protested.

"I can see that. I'm sorry," Siri said.

"I mean my false eye," Fligh explained. "It was a beauty, wasn't it?" he asked Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan. "But I decided I had to leave it at the scene of my murder. It's those kinds of touches that convince people you're really dead."

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"How did you do it?" Obi-Wan asked curiously.

"I have a friend who works at the morgue on Coruscant," Fligh explained. "And I think my job is tough."

"You don't have a job," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"Being a thief is a *job*," Fligh answered huffily. "I get up every morning and go to work, just like everybody else. But this particular morning, I realized that someone was trying to kill me. When you get a whip wrapped around your neck, it wakes you up to the possibility. Luckily my landlord is handy with an electrojabber. But I thought I should disappear for a while. So I spoke to my friend at the morgue, and he found someone with my general characteristics. Who was dead, I mean."

"We assumed that," Qui-Gon said.

"My friend did the rest. We drove the body to the alley and left it there. Along with my eye, alas. I knew the security police would not bother to run ID scans on the body – there are some advantages to being someone nobody cares about. Just another piece of riffraff meeting a sad end. They'd accept the text doc identification and just cart the body to the morgue. Nobody would shed a tear."

"Didi did," Qui-Gon said sternly.

Fligh brightened. "He did? He is such a good friend!"

"But why would Ona Nobis be after you?" Obi-Wan wondered aloud. "You didn't have Zan Arbor's datapad any longer. You gave it to Astri."

Fligh shrugged. "I was just a loose end, I guess."

"Oh, I think you were more than that," Qui-Gon said, crossing his arms. "You're leaving something out, Fligh. The body was found drained of blood. Why did you do that?"

"Because that was how Ona Nobis left her victims," Fligh responded. "Six of my fellow riffraff were found that way."

"But we didn't know that yet. No one had yet traced Zan Arbor to Ren S'orn, or any other victim. We didn't even know Zan Arbor had anything to do with the attack on Didi."

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"Ah, Jedi logic, so impressive," Fligh said nervously. "Are you sure?"

Qui-Gon nodded. "Very sure. Which means that *you* knew Zan Arbor was behind the attack. And you knew she was conducting experiments that involved extracting blood from her victims."

"Hmm, interesting point," Fligh said. "I find I must agree. Maybe I *did* know that. Maybe I traced a few of the murdered riffraff to Zan Arbor's lab. Maybe that's why I stole her data-pad in the first place. But I didn't see why it would help Didi to know that. At the time. I felt badly after he was hurt, of course. Maybe I should have warned him after all. Maybe I should be a better person in general. But at least I am watching over Astri while Didi is in your excellent Jedi hands. I'll protect her if anything happens. Of course," Fligh added quickly, edging away with an uneasy smile, "I am hopeless at protection and therefore delighted to see that the Jedi are by her side. Obviously, I am not needed, so I guess I'll just head off. ..."

"Not so fast," Qui-Gon said, catching Fligh by the elbow. "I have more questions. What about Senator S'orn's datapad?"

"What about it?" Fligh asked.

"What happened to it?"

Obi-Wan looked at Fligh curiously. He hadn't thought of the question, but he was interested in the answer. Once they had identified Jenna Zan Arbor as the one who had hired Ona Nobis, they had stopped investigating what was on Senator S'orn's datapad, or what had happened to it. It seemed a minor detail. But Uta S'orn kept connecting to the mission, whether she wanted to or not. Maybe there was a detail they had overlooked.

"I still have it," Fligh said. "I haven't had a chance to sell it yet." He slipped a small data-pad out of his tunic. "See?"

Qui-Gon took it from him.

"There you go," Fligh said, waving a hand. "I won't even ask for credits. See how generous I can be with stolen property? You will have to erase all those files on it. Just Senate holo transcripts

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of speeches. Or leave them, and you can use them as a sleeping potion." Fligh made a loud snoring noise. "Take it from me. Very dull. Now, if you don't need me, I'll be going. This world is too depressing, even for me. I think I'll head back to the fun-filled world of Coruscant."

Waving, Fligh took off. Qui-Gon turned his attention to the datapad. He quickly accessed the files and searched through them. Obi-Wan watched over his shoulder. Hovercams recorded all Senate proceedings. Each Senator could download transcripts into their own datapads for official records. Senator S'orn had recordings of several speeches she had made.

Qui-Gon shut down the datapad. He glanced at Adi.

"What are you thinking?" he asked her quietly.

"I do not like how Uta S'orn keeps coming into this mission," Adi said. "Let's get to the landing platform."

Chapter Fourteen

On the way to the platform, Qui-Gon contacted Tahl and asked her to investigate the odd bacteria formation on Belasco.

He was about to sign off when he had a thought. "Tahl, can you forward the official Senate hovercam transcripts from... hold on." Qui-Gon accessed the file listing and read out the dates and times.

"Sure," Tahl said dryly. "I just love dealing with the Senate bureaucracy. Nothing I like better."

"That's what I thought." Smiling, Qui-Gon cut the communication.

"Why did you ask Tahl to do that?" Siri asked.

"Just a hunch. I want to make sure the transcript on Senator S'orn's datapad matches the official filed version," Qui-Gon explained. "I've heard of senators bribing the operators to alter official transcripts for one reason or another. There must be a reason Senator S'orn has kept those transcripts on her datapad. Maybe we'll find out why."

At the docking platform, the Jedi headed for the official in charge of off-planet vessel registration. Transports to Belasco had slowed to a trickle as word had reached the galaxy of the water shortage. It was easy for the dockmaster to check the records over the past two days.

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"That V-wing cruiser is unusual," the official said. "You don't see many of them in private use. I think I can find it... here it is. Registered to a Belascan native who was arriving home. Cir L'ani and one passenger."

"Do you have a record of the passenger?" Adi asked. "Can you give us a description?"

"Do you think I remember every ship that docks here?" the official asked, shaking his head. "Just the pilot of the vessel registered. That's all we require. Sorry."

They thanked the official and walked out onto the busy platform.

"It could be them," Adi said. "But we need proof."

"Let's ask a worker," Qui-Gon suggested. He gazed around the platform. "Why don't we each pick someone and see what we can find out."

The group split off. Obi-Wan stayed where he was. He scanned the different workers on the platform. Some were checking text docs, some directing transport, and some refueling ships. He did not know how to choose.

But then he noticed a young woman, dressed in the coveralls of a mechanic, who was working at the refueling bay. The young woman was busy doing her job, but as she worked she gazed at the different ships as they came in for landings. Something about the alertness on her face caught Obi-Wan's attention. This was someone who admired sleek airships. She would remember the V-wing cruiser.

He walked over and nodded a hello.

"If you need refueling, you have to signal the controller," the worker said. "Get a number and wait your turn. You can signal from your ship or go over there." She pointed to a booth a short distance away.

"I don't need refueling," Obi-Wan said. "I'm looking for someone. She landed in a V-wing cruiser. Black with silver underside –"

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"I remember that ship," the young woman said, her eyes suddenly brightening. "She was a beauty. I'd love to get my hands on those controls. "

"Do you remember the pilot and passengers?"

She wiped her hands on her coveralls, thinking. "I remember I was surprised. I expected some hotshot pilot to come strutting out of that cockpit. Instead there was a petite human woman and a sick old man. Her father, she said. I refueled them."

"How do you know he was sick?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Because he was taken out on a med-splint. I don't think he was conscious. A medic met them when they landed. A tall Belascan male."

That could have been Ona Nobis in disguise.

"Do you know where they went?" Obi-Wan asked.

The worker shifted her feet. She was constantly moving as Obi-Wan asked her questions. And she seemed so nervous. "No, but they had to file a flight plan." Gazing at Obi-Wan, she wiggled her foot.

Obi-Wan noticed the movement and looked down. A small hand was curled around the worker's ankle.

"That's my boy, Ned," she said in a whisper. "Please don't report me. I had to bring him to work this week. My mother is ill and she's the one who takes care of him."

Obi-Wan smiled down at the boy, who looked up at him. A small toy was clutched in his dirty fist. "I won't tell. Thank you for your help."

He hurried over to Qui-Gon to tell him what he'd learned.

"That sounds like a good lead," Qui-Gon said. "I'm sure the flight plan is false, however."

But Adi was more skeptical. "I would like better confirmation," she said. "There are many ill elders on Belasco. I'm not sure if this will convince Uta S'orn."

"I hate the thought of Noor being unconscious," Siri said worriedly.

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"She drugged him, most likely," Qui-Gon said. "If that was really Noor," Adi said.

Obi-Wan caught Qui-Gon's irritation. Adi's instincts were renowned, but she did not abandon her need for absolute facts. They needed proof. Suddenly, Obi-Wan remembered something that had nagged at him.

"Wait," he told the others. Then he hurried back over to the worker.

She looked at him anxiously. "I'll lose my job if you tell my supervisor about Ned – "

"Don't worry," Obi-Wan assured her. He crouched down and spoke to the boy. "That's a nice toy. Can I hold it for just a second?"

The friendly boy nodded and handed it to Obi-Wan.

It was a model of a tiny V-wing cruiser. It had been cleverly fashioned from slender threads tightly wrapped over bits of metal.

Obi-Wan fingered the threads. They had come from a Jedi's robe. Noor had only pretended to be unconscious. He had left them a clue.

Chapter Fifteen

Now that they knew for sure that Noor was on Belasco, they had to discover why Jenna Zan Arbor had traveled there. Adi and Qui-Gon set up two datapads on board the consular ship. They ran the Senate transcript on one datapad, and Uta S'orn's on the other. Obi-Wan and Siri sat, watching intently.

"Look for the smallest difference," Qui-Gon advised. "There will be much talk, so listen carefully."

The holocam had recorded a session in the Senate that dealt with regulations in the Mindemir system. Senators got up and spoke endlessly about complicated rules. They interrupted one another and heaped praise and scorn on one another. They spoke for long minutes and said nothing.

Siri caught Obi-Wan's eye and faked a huge yawn. Adi saw the gesture.

"Every task requires full attention," she told Siri sternly. Then she turned back to Qui-Gon and murmured, "But I'm having trouble myself."

"I don't understand," Obi-Wan said. "Uta S'orn isn't even visible in the transmission." "Exactly," Qui-Gon said.

Obi-Wan was mystified. He returned his attention to both transmissions, but it was hard to know what he was looking for.

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At last a list of regulations was passed. The holocam hovered above as Senators rose to the front of their boxes to vote. The regulations were passed by a majority. Then, the screen went black.

"Shall we play it again?" Adi asked.

"Do we have to?" Siri muttered.

"Wait," Qui-Gon said. He scanned backward as the vote was called. "I think I know what is different. Here." He pointed to the screen on the left, which was the official Senate transmission.

"Look at the delegate from Hino-111," he said. He pressed the zoom function on the transmission for a closer view. "He is not pressing the 'yes' button. He is voting *against* the measure. Yet in the audio he is voting for it." Qui-Gon pressed the zoom function on the second datapad. "And here, he has recorded a 'no' vote. This is Uta S'orn's version."

Adi leaned closer. "She altered the official Senate record?"

"I'm sure if we study this we will find other votes that have been changed. The Senate recorder uses the official transcript to record votes. These regulations were never passed. Senators vote on thousands of regulations. Mindemir is a small system. It is a risky move, but this transcript is from eight months ago. Obviously, she got away with it."

"But why would she care about a regulation on Mindemir?" Obi-Wan asked.

"I'm sure she does not care for herself. She was paid to do this," Qui-Gon said. "Paid in credits or influence. The question is, who paid her?"

"Jenna Zan Arbor?" Siri guessed.

"That is what we need to know." Qui-Gon was already reaching for his comlink. "This is a job for Tahl." He walked away a few paces to speak quietly.

"Why would she keep the real transcript?" Siri asked. "It could incriminate her."

"For blackmail," Adi said. "She could always threaten to expose the person who engineered this. She could send it

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anonymously to the Senate. Perhaps she's covered her tracks so well that they could not tie the deception to her."

Qui-Gon returned with the news that Tahl would get back to them as quickly as possible. They reviewed the other transcripts. It was easier now that they knew what they were looking for. In each case, the votes had been altered.

By the time they finished, Tahl had signaled Qui-Gon.

"You are right," she said. "Jenna Zan Arbor conducted a series of experiments on the water supply of Mindemir. She needed a large planetary system to prove her theory, apparently. Endangering a whole system was of course against Senate regulations. But Senator S'orn introduced legislation that would allow this, if the planet's legislative body agreed to the experiment. The measure passed in the Galactic Senate and a few weeks later the government of Mindemir voted to allow the experiment."

"Easier to bribe a politician on a small planet to push through legislation," Adi said shrewdly. "But she needed someone powerful in the Galactic Senate."

"So we've linked Jenna Zan Arbor and Uta S'orn at last," Qui-Gon said quietly. "Zan Arbor said S'orn had been helpful to her. I did not think she meant S'orn had acted illegally."

"It is hard to believe," Adi said. "She has a reputation for great integrity."

"Eight months ago, Ren S'orn was still alive," Obi-Wan said. "Jenna Zan Arbor was conducting her experiments on the Force as well. What if Senator S'orn knew this? What if Jenna Zan Arbor was blackmailing *her*?"

"So S'orn knew that Zan Arbor was holding her son, and she did what Zan Arbor asked?" Qui-Gon frowned thoughtfully. "It's possible."

"All the more reason to help Uta S'orn now," Adi said. "Whether she wants us to or not."

Chapter Sixteen

Faced with the evidence, Uta S'orn crumbled.

"Yes," she said. "I altered the record."

She sat on a bench, her hands dangling between her knees. The grounds were quiet now, with most of the patients back in the Ward Domes.

"I had to," Uta S'orn said. "She had my son." "So you altered the Senate record in order to save him," Adi prodded gently.

S'orn nodded. "And then she released him. But something went wrong. He was found dead. She told me that he had tried to break back into the lab, and Ona Nobis had killed him. I don't know whether to believe her, but what can I do? I broke Senate laws. My son is dead. The only thing left for me is to devote myself to the people of Belasco, the only way I can. I cannot imagine why Jenna would contact me again. She must be here for another purpose. Surely she will leave me alone now, after all she's done."

Usually, Uta S'orn's manner was brusque and impatient. Now Obi-Wan saw how deeply her grief ran. Her voice trembled, and her eyes were full of tears.

A tall man dressed in rich robes approached, followed by royal droid guards. Although his hair was silver, his face was youthful.

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"Uta, are you all right? Do I need to eject these people?"

She hurriedly wiped her eyes. "No. This is our Leader, Min K'atel," she said to the others.

Qui-Gon and Adi bowed. "We are Jedi Knights Qui-Gon Jinn and Adi Gallia, and these are our Padawans, Obi-Wan Kenobi and Siri."

The Leader gave a short nod. "I don't care if you are Jedi, you are not to disturb Uta S'orn."

"They speak of things I'd rather forget," Uta S'orn said. "I don't mean to blame them, but –"

"Your distress is enough," Min K'atel said. He turned to the Jedi. "I must request that you leave the royal grounds. You have upset Belasco's greatest Senator."

"We are just leaving," Qui-Gon said politely. The Jedi bowed and made their way out of the glade. As they struck out across the lawn,

Obi-Wan said, "I have never seen Uta S'orn so affected before."

"Yes, she seemed so," Qui-Gon said. "But you noticed she manipulated the Leader so that he would throw us out."

"She is lying," Adi said.

Qui-Gon shot Adi a quick glance. "You are certain?"

Adi nodded. "I don't know why. Something in her words is false." Her steps slowed, and she stopped. "I feel that he is here. Somewhere near."

"Moor is on the royal grounds?" Qui-Gon asked. "Let's return to Min K'atel and demand that he search."

Adi shook her head. "It's only a feeling." "That is all we have! What good are your instincts, Adi, if you do not trust them?"

Adi met his gaze sternly. "I trust them. But I do not expect them to sway others. We cannot involve a government in our investigation without proof. You know that as well as I do."

Qui-Gon struggled with his impatience. His mind was tired, his body spent. He was not connecting to the Force as Adi was. His ragged nerves screamed for an end to this.

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Adi had spoken to him of cooperation and loyalty. He would have to submit to her wishes now. She had just as much right to choose a direction as he did.

"What, then?" he asked. "What do you suggest?"

"Let us follow our suspicions to the logical next step," Adi said. "We must have permission to search those grounds. Min K'atel is not likely to give it to us as things stand. We will have to convince him. There is one last place to go."

Qui-Gon nodded. "The water purification plant. But we'll never get permission to enter."

"Then we'll just have to break in," Adi said grimly. "Yes, sometimes I do act on my instincts, Qui-Gon. The answer lies there."

Chapter Seventeen

The plant was gated and heavily guarded. No doubt the security had been increased because of the bacterial invasion. The Jedi hovered in a heavily forested area on the fenced perimeter. Qui-Gon swept the area with macrobinoculars.

"There are none of the usual ways to breach security," he noted. "Anyone entering must go through a retinal scan. There are guard droids posted at every entrance. Even after we took care of the guards, we would have to break in with our lightsabers. And that would most likely trigger a full-scale security alert."

"We want to get in and out without being seen," Adi said.

"Not to mention without any loss of life," Qui-Gon added. He stared at the plant, thinking. Then, suddenly, he saw a way. "Of course," he said. "We can't walk in. But we can swim."

The Great Sea narrowed to a fast-moving river downstream from the plant. The water foamed around boulders and formed mini-falls in the center of the river.

"The current is very strong." Adi glanced at Qui-Gon. He saw the concern on her face. "Maybe it would be better if only one team goes in."

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"We have a better chance if we all do." Qui-Gon took out his breathing tube and was the first to wade into the shockingly cold water.

"When we get to the in-draw pipes, there will most likely be a filter covering the opening," Qui-Gon said. "We can't use our lightsabers, so we'll have to use vibrocutters. Stay close to us, Padawans. Do not be afraid to ask for our help if you tire."

And you, Qui-Gon? Will you ask for help if you need it?

Adi's dark gaze asked the question. He ignored it.

The Jedi slipped underwater. Qui-Gon felt the current pull him along. It was carrying him in the right direction, but he had to take care not to bump against the boulders or get caught in the swirling eddys. It took all of his strength.

The current swept them toward the pipes. As they got closer, they felt themselves being sucked along even faster. Now the danger would lie in being slammed up against the filters.

As they approached the pipes, Adi motioned to them to fight the current. Waving their arms to slow their pace, they managed to gently bump against the giant filter. Already Qui-Gon had reached for his vibrocutter. He and Adi went to work as their Padawans hung on to the grates.

Quickly, they sliced a hole in the filters and motioned their Padawans through first. Immediately after entering the pipe, they were sucked along by the action of the water, bumping on the sides of the pipe, turning and tumbling until Qui-Gon did not know which way was up. His shoulder wound cried out at the twisting motion. By the time he spilled out into a giant tank, he was overcome with dizziness.

He felt Obi-Wan touch his shoulder. His Padawan had noticed his distress. Qui-Gon nodded to let Obi-Wan know he was all right even as he fought his queasiness.

They quickly swam to the side of the tank and swung themselves up and over the side. They were in a large viaduct made of stone. Banks of equipment surrounded the tank. Further

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on the water was treated, but here, machines took random samplings of its quality.

Adi pointed to a tech console nearby. While Adi, Obi-Wan, and Siri kept watch, Qui-Gon pressed buttons and levers until a long panel slid open. A storage unit held vials of water samples, labeled by date.

"We'll never get out the same way," Qui-Gon said to Adi as he tucked the samples into his tunic. "We'll have to find some tech jackets and pose as workers."

She nodded. "There's got to be a supply closet."

Suddenly, a red light on the console pulsed. A few seconds later, they heard the sound of approaching droids. "I think it's time to leave," Qui-Gon said, reaching for his lightsaber. "Let's do this quickly, before the Belascan guards arrive."

The guard droids wheeled around the corner, blasters held high. The Jedi charged as one spinning block, lightsabers in constant motion. Qui-Gon took out two droids with one stroke. Adi flipped over the group and attacked from behind. Siri went down on one knee and came up with a mighty swing that knocked one droid over and cut the other in two. Obi-Wan went for the droids on Qui-Gon's left side, slicing the top off of one droid and burying his lightsaber in the control panel of the other.

In just seconds, it was over.

"Belascan guards will be here soon," Qui-Gon said, breathing heavily. "Never mind getting out quietly. Let's just get out."

Together, he and Adi cut a hole in the durasteel exit door with their lightsabers. A siren began to clang. With the noise ringing in their ears, the Jedi leaped through the hole in the door and raced for the high fence.

Qui-Gon reached out for the Force. He needed it desperately if he were to make it over that fence. He heard blaster fire ping near his ear. Obi-Wan and Siri sailed over the fence, clearing it by several centimeters. He saw that Adi had slowed her pace to make sure that he would be able to clear it.

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With a mighty effort, Qui-Gon forced his tired muscles to cooperate. His feeling of the Force surged, helping his leap. Still, he slammed against the top of the fence and had to haul himself over by hand. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Adi sail over.

Qui-Gon landed heavily and a little off balance. He raced for the treeline. He ignored the blaster fire behind him, counting on Adi to expertly divert any fire that came too close.

He reached the safety of the trees and glanced back. "They are not following. They don't have to. They know who we are."

Adi tucked her lightsaber back into her belt. "It won't take long before Min K'atel orders us off the planet. I think we just wore out our welcome."

Chapter Eighteen

Qui-Gon leaned against the trunk of a tree, his eyes closed, as Adi ran the samples through an analyzer and then sent the data to Tahl.

Obi-Wan approached him and sat down gingerly. He knew that Qui-Gon did not want him to speak. But he was worried.

"You have not regained your strength, Master," he said quietly. "Are you sure that – " He stopped. Qui-Gon had opened one eye. That was enough to stop his voice in his throat.

"Winna Di Uni told me it would take time," Qui-Gon said. "It is doing so." He closed his eyes. "Do not worry, Padawan. This will be over soon. Then I will rest."

Obi-Wan nodded, even though Qui-Gon did not see him. He had observed his Master tired and in pain before, but never so diminished. It was a strange feeling. If Qui-Gon could weaken, any Jedi was vulnerable.

Adi's comlink signaled, and she quickly pressed the holo function. Tahl appeared.

"The bacteria have been bioengineered," she said without any preliminaries. "It has been cleverly done. The measures taken to restrain it actually caused it to grow."

Qui-Gon sat up, alert. "Can you tell the scientists here how to control it?"

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"They already know," Tahl said. "A scientific research company on Belasco announced a discovery just a few hours ago. They now know how to neutralize the bacteria. They also have found a way to treat those who are already sick. They will make a fortune."

"A fortune," Obi-Wan repeated softly. "And a piece of a fortune was offered to Ona Nobis if she came back."

Adi leaned toward Tahl. "Can you trace the company back to..."

"Zan Arbor Industries? I already have," Tahl said.

Siri slapped a hand on her leg. "We've got her." "Now we have to find her," Adi said.

"I'll be standing by," Tahl said, and her image faded.

Qui-Gon stood. "Let's head back to the royal grounds. I'm certain the answer is there."

The sun was lowering as the Jedi hurried through back streets toward the palace gates.

Streams of Belascan citizens were heading there as well. They realized quickly that news had spread about the discovery. The people were gathering to celebrate. They would have plenty of cover.

And so would Ona Nobis.

They moved through the crowd on the palace lawns, searching for Astri.

"I don't see her anywhere," Qui-Gon said. "She's supposed to be keeping an eye on Uta S'orn."

"There she is," Obi-Wan said, pointing. "She's wearing a medic aide coverall."

Dressed in white, Astri wheeled a young boy through the garden. She bent down to pull a blanket over his lap.

"It's good cover," Qui-Gon said. "But what about Cholly, Weez, and Tup?"

Tup burst out of one of the Med Wards at the head of a group of children, juggling three bright laserballs. Weez followed.

"At least they are staying out of trouble," Qui-Gon said.

Jude Watson

Astri caught sight of them and hurried over, her face alight.

"Have you heard the news? A cure has been found!"

"We've heard," Adi said. "But we still have a problem."

"I've been keeping track of Uta S'orn," Astri said. "I haven't seen anything suspicious. She's out in the open all the time. She's devoting herself to the children. She does everything, even helps with food service."

Qui-Gon tensed. "Do you have access to the palace kitchens?" he asked Astri.

Astri nodded. "Food delivery is one place that they are shorthanded. Everyone can pitch in and help."

"Do you think it's possible to track the meals that leave the kitchens? Can you count the meal trays?"

"Yes," Astri said. "Cholly has been helping to prepare the trays."

"How are the meals delivered?" Adi asked.

"Through the tunnels, mostly," Astri said. "They were built about a century ago, during a war with a neighboring planet. It's the fastest way to get from the kitchens to the ward areas. They built the domes over the old entrances in the gardens, just for that reason."

"When is the next meal?" Qui-Gon asked. Astri checked her timepiece. "Cholly should be preparing the trays right now."

"Good," Qui-Gon said. "Obi-Wan, Siri, I want you to go with Astri to the kitchens. Compare the number of food trays with the number of sick children. If there are more trays than children, follow Uta S'orn. Make sure she does not see you! Note where she delivers the trays. If Ona Nobis and Zan Arbor are on the grounds, they have to eat."

Qui-Gon fixed Obi-Wan and Siri with his most serious glare. "If you see, or even sense, that Ona Nobis is near, do not engage with her. Come back for Adi and myself."

Obi-Wan and Siri agreed and followed Astri to the palace kitchen. It was an enormous room filled with food stations and

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storage. Obi-Wan and Siri waited in the dim hallway while Astri went inside.

Cholly was busy setting up trays with bowls of stew, bread, and a fruit tart. Other workers milled about, dishing up the stew and pushing the trays forward in a line to be loaded onto carts.

Swiftly, Astri ran her eyes down the rows of trays, counting. She slipped outside to the hall.

"There are sixty-four trays," she said. "Two extra. Qui-Gon was right. Now we have to wait for Uta S'orn."

Moments later, the other workers began to fill the kitchen. They each took a cart and slid trays inside the warming element. Uta S'orn arrived and quickly worked to fill her own cart.

"I'll take Ward Five, as usual," she said.

She rolled the cart out into the hallway and headed for the tunnel. Obi-Wan and Siri pressed back against the wall. They moved silently behind Uta S'orn, keeping as close as they dared through the twisting maze.

Uta S'orn delivered the meals to Ward Five first. They watched as she ascended the ramp into the ward. When she returned, she still had two trays on her cart. She made a sudden turn and came straight toward them.

Obi-Wan and Siri threw themselves back into a side tunnel. They flattened themselves against a wall and tried not to breathe. If Uta S'orn came down this way, they would be discovered.

They were lucky. She turned down an opposite tunnel. After a moment, they followed cautiously. The tunnel narrowed as it turned sharply to the left. Obi-Wan had been careful to keep track of how they were moving. He knew that they had turned away from the main wing of the palace and the wards and were heading toward Uta S'orn's private quarters.

Suddenly, they heard the cart stop. Obi-Wan crept forward. He peered around the corner long enough to see Uta S'orn place the trays on the floor. Then she turned toward him.

He ducked back and motioned to Siri. The two ran lightly down the tunnel, hearing S'orn behind them. She could not move

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as fast due to the cart. They reached the main tunnel and Obi-Wan headed left, guessing she was on her way back to the palace kitchens.

After a few moments Uta S'orn emerged and took the route Obi-Wan had predicted. Obi-Wan and Siri headed back the way they had come. They waited at the curve of the tunnel.

"What if Ona Nobis comes from behind us?" Siri whispered.

"We run," Obi-Wan whispered back.

To Obi-Wan's surprise, a small vent in the ceiling over the food trays opened. Ona Nobis slithered through, her Sorrowian skeletal system compressing to allow her to fit through the tiny space.

Siri's hand went to her lightsaber. She began to draw it out. In a swift move, Obi-Wan put his hand on her wrist to stop her. She glared at him, but he did not let go.

Ona Nobis picked up the sweet fruit tart from one tray and popped it in her mouth. Quickly, she gobbled up the second tart, then wiped her fingers delicately on her tunic.

"Sneak," Siri whispered in Obi-Wan's ear.

Ona Nobis pushed the food trays through the vent overhead. Then she hoisted herself up and through.

"We should have attacked," Siri whispered fiercely after Nobis disappeared.

"Siri, Qui-Gon told us not to," Obi-Wan said irritably.

"But we were so close! And she didn't have her whip," Siri argued. Her blue eyes glinted a challenge in the darkness of the tunnel, and she thrust her chin at Obi-Wan. "Or were you afraid to meet her again?"

Chapter Nineteen

Adi and Qui-Gon listened to Siri and Obi-Wan's story. Adi gave a satisfied nod.

"They're here. That means that Noor is here as well." Adi glanced at Qui-Gon. "We have enough to speak to the Leader. We must take the risk."

"I agree," Qui-Gon said. "If we are lucky, we will avoid a battle. Whether Uta S'orn is being forced to hide Zan Arbor or not, he must be told."

Around them, preparations for a celebration had begun. The Leader had decided to throw a grand party for the city of Senta. More and more of the population streamed into the royal grounds. The gardens glowed with candles and lights. Musicians were beginning to set up near the flower garden. Servants, officials, and townspeople milled about on the lawns, fragrant with evening dew.

Min K'atel sat, beaming, with his wife. Their daughter sat between them, wrapped in a warm quilt. Uta S'orn sat to their right. As the Jedi walked toward him, Min K'atel's wide smile faded and he fixed them with a stony glance.

"I have received a report that saboteurs broke into the water purification center, no doubt to reintroduce more deadly bacteria," he said. "My security chief tells me these saboteurs

Jude Watson

were Jedi. Either you are impersonating Jedi, or everything I know of your order is wrong. Which is it?"

The Leader gave a signal, and the gleaming guard droids appeared, flanking the group of Jedi.

"We are neither saboteurs nor impersonators," Adi said in her strong, commanding voice. "We are Jedi Knights, come to find one of our own and to investigate your troubles."

"We do not need your help," Min K'atel said haughtily.

"But you need to know what we discovered," Qui-Gon said. "The bacteria in your water supply was deliberately introduced."

"You are strangers here," Min K'atel replied stonily. "You do not know that on Belasco, this bacteria arrives every seven years."

"We do know this," Qui-Gon said. "As did the person who bioengineered the bacteria to reproduce. She knew that you would not suspect that it was artificially introduced into your system because it was something you had seen before. But this bacteria was different. It was meant to multiply in response to the attempt to contain it."

Min K'atel stared at them. "And who would do this thing, and why?"

"Someone who stood to profit by eliminating it," Adi replied. "A brilliant scientist named Jenna Zan Arbor. She is behind the scientific group who will cure it, and she will make a fortune, enough to help her escape justice and remain a fugitive."

"She is not Belascan," Min K'atel guessed. "How could she do such a thing without help?"

"She had the help of a prominent Belascan who had access to areas of the highest security," Adi responded. She fixed her commanding gaze on Uta S'orn.

S'orn did not bluster or deny the charge. She raised an eyebrow and looked disdainfully at the Jedi.

Min K'atel glanced at S'orn. "This is preposterous," he said. "You try to cover your own involvement by accusing one of

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Belasco's finest citizens! I will contact the Jedi Council. I will not let this accusation stand!"

"Uta S'orn is hiding Jenna Zan Arbor and the Jedi Master she is holding hostage," Qui-Gon stated. "If you would give the order to search her quarters, you would find them."

"I will not give such an order!"

Adi and Qui-Gon activated their lightsabers in a split second. Obi- Wan and Siri quickly followed.

"I'm afraid we must insist," Qui-Gon said. "A Jedi is being held captive on your grounds. That makes you responsible. If we must fight a battle to release him, know that we will."

Min K'atel looked uncertain. "There is no other Jedi here. Only wards full of sick children and elders."

"I saw a sick elder," Min K'atel's daughter, Joli, suddenly piped up. She shook the doll in her lap, moving its arms and legs. "He made this."

"And how did he give it to you?" Adi asked gently.

"He threw it down into the bushes," Joli said. "He threw down other toys to the children. Mine is the best." She smiled down at the doll in her lap. "It is the prettiest."

"Mine is the prettiest!" a young girl said, running forward, waving a doll.

"No, mine!" A boy shook a toy in the air. Qui-Gon walked forward. He gently took the doll from Joli's hand. He held it against his robe. The color and texture of the threads matched exactly.

"Do you still say a Jedi is not on your property?" he asked Min K'atel.

Min K'atel's eyes traveled high above to the window where his daughter had seen the toy-maker. It was in Uta S'orn's quarters.

He did not look at Uta S'orn. "Search her quarters," he said to the captain of the guard.

Uta S'orn shrugged as the members of the royal guard rushed off. "They will find nothing."

Jude Watson

"If that is so, then I will apologize most humbly," Min K'atel said. He turned to the guard droids. "Surround Senator S'orn."

The guard droids wheeled in formation. But instead of turning on Uta S'orn, they turned on the Jedi.

Chapter Twenty

"They have been reprogrammed," Qui-Gon said tersely.

The words had barely left his mouth when the droids began to fire. Blaster fire erupted in a flash around the Jedi.

Only the group immediately around them realized what was happening. The partygoers on the lawn thought the flash was part of the celebrations. They applauded as the Jedi began to spin, their lightsabers a blur. Musicians played nearby, and the people turned toward the music.

Obi-Wan thought of the many children surrounding them. His primary objective was to contain the battle so that they would not be injured by stray blaster fire. He knew the others had the same thought.

The droids stayed in formation, wheeling to attack and then regrouping. Uta S'orn slipped off her seat of honor and disappeared into the crowd.

The Jedi did not need to confer on strategy. Along with protecting the Belascans in the garden, they had to get to Uta S'orn's quarters. They formed a tight circle to deflect the blaster fire and attack the royal droids. As they fought, they moved steadily forward, fanning out to break the strict formation of the guards.

"Cover me," Qui-Gon said tersely.

Jude Watson

Adi, Siri, and Obi-Wan stepped up the attack. They were a blur of movement now, moving together, covering one another and then reversing to deliver a furious attack on the droids.

Obi-Wan reached out to Adi and Siri, catching the rhythm of their battle strategy. Adi relied on Siri's quick footwork and gymnastic leaps. Siri depended on Adi's dazzling lightsaber action. Together, they were an amazing pair.

But even as they littered the grounds with broken droids, more arrived in what seemed to be a never-ending stream. They poured out of the palace guard room, blaster rifles pointed at the Jedi.

Fighting battle droids had its own challenges. Their weakness was the same as their strength: They did not think. They responded to stimulus. They saw beings as targets to be destroyed. Their complicated wiring could be compromised by one good blow. Yet their accuracy was impeccable.

Even as he fought, Obi-Wan kept in mind that Qui-Gon had run into the palace alone. He would meet Ona Nobis there. He remembered with alarm how Qui-Gon had not been able to clear the fence earlier. Qui-Gon needed backup.

He knew Adi was thinking the same thing. Without a word or a glance, they accelerated their drive with a furious series of volleys. They pushed forward until they were at the entrance to the palace.

Obi-Wan launched a quick reversal, sweeping up with his lightsaber, then leaping and twisting in midair to come down behind the droids. He attacked from behind, leveling four with two blows. Meanwhile, Adi and Siri slipped inside the palace. Obi-Wan leaped again, this time landing on the threshold of the entrance. With a backward kick that sent a droid flying, he raced inside.

The palace was dim after the blazing lights of the festival outside. Obi-Wan sensed rather than saw movement. Adi and Siri were heading up a grand staircase.

"This way," Adi called to him as she ran.

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Obi-Wan started for the stairs. Suddenly, blaster fire erupted near him. Chips of stone flew from the step where his foot had been. He turned to attack, but his balance was slightly off. He knew his countermove would be clumsy.

He saw a blur near his shoulder. Siri had leaped from the top stair. She twisted in midair, holding her lightsaber high. As she came down, she sliced off the head of a royal guard droid.

"Thanks," Obi-Wan said.

"Anytime."

Obi-Wan raced up the grand staircase, Siri now behind him. He called on the Force to direct him, following the stir of air and heat that Adi had left in her pursuit. He ran down long corridors. Ahead, he heard the sound of shouting.

He burst into a high-ceilinged room. Jenna Zan Arbor stood in the center, her hands in front of her. Noor was bound and shackled with energy cuffs at his ankles and wrists.

"I am holding the formula for the eradication of the waterborne bacteria," Jenna Zan Arbor said, holding up a palm-sized datapad. "There is one crucial linkage missing from the version the scientists hold. Only I can cure this world. If you kill me, many will die."

Qui-Gon's lightsaber was held at his side. Adi stood near him. Obi-Wan had stopped short. He waited for the two Jedi Masters to decide on a strategy.

"We do not want to kill you," Qui-Gon said.

"Capture is death to me," Jenna Zan Arbor said. "It's freedom or nothing."

Adi and Qui-Gon did not look at each other. Yet Obi-Wan sensed that they were communicating. Noor's eyes were closed, but Obi-Wan felt the Force from him, as well. And this time Zan Arbor had no instruments to measure it.

He felt, rather than saw, Qui-Gon gather his strength. Obi-Wan felt its power.

Elation surged through him. Qui-Gon was back.

Jude Watson

The datapad flew from Jenna Zan Arbor's hand and into Qui-Gon's suddenly extended left palm. At the same time, he leaped forward, his lightsaber slicing the air. Jenna Zan Arbor flinched, but he merely slashed at a hanging behind her. A large tapestry on the wall flipped over to land on top of her. At the same time, Adi sprang forward to free Noor.

Qui-Gon calmly tucked the datapad in his utility belt. He bent to capture Jenna Zan Arbor as she came up from underneath the tapestry, coughing from the dust.

"After all your experiments with the Force, in the end you failed to understand its power," Qui-Gon said.

She fixed him with a look of rage. "I should have killed you when I could."

"That," Qui-Gon said, "was your other mistake."

Obi-Wan looked around for Siri. She should have been right behind him. She was not. Alarm ticked inside him. Siri was always where the battle was.

And where was Ona Nobis?

Obi-Wan turned and ran back down the long corridor. He reached out to the Force, searching for Siri. She was close. He could feel her. In times of danger, their connection grew closer.

She was above him.

He raced to the staircase. It curved up and around and he lost sight of the top in the dimness. Obi-Wan dashed up the curving staircase. He paused at each landing but heard and felt nothing. She was still above him. At last he reached the top. A long corridor with thick carpets stretched before him. Frustrated, Obi-Wan paused. Siri was not on this floor.

He spied a small door to his right. Obi-Wan flung it open. He saw a narrow staircase twisting upward to the roof. In that instant he knew that Siri was up there and needed him.

He charged up the stairs, activating his lightsaber as he ran. He burst out onto the roof.

For a moment, his eyes were dazzled. The festival lights blazed far below. The lawns beyond were inky black. This

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portion of the roof was flat, but gables and turrets surrounded him.

He saw the pale violet glow of Siri's lightsaber. Her back was to the roof wall. Ona Nobis had her cornered. The laser whip wrapped around Siri's lightsaber, nearly wrenching it from her grasp. Siri placed her other hand on the hilt and held on, but she stumbled. Ona Nobis withdrew the blaster from the holster strapped to her thigh.

Obi-Wan charged, even as he reached out a hand to direct the Force. He could not count on his ability to move objects. But the Force surged this time, knocking the blaster from Ona Nobis's hand and sending her staggering slightly from surprise.

Obi-Wan did not stop, but leaped and twisted in order to come at Nobis from her other side, leaving Siri free to regroup.

The whip furled and his lightsaber hit it with a sizzle. Smoke curled upward. He twisted the lightsaber to release it. Ona Nobis reached for her second blaster.

Siri gripped her lightsaber and advanced. Sweat soaked her hair and tunic. Grimly she swung at Ona Nobis but the bounty hunter twisted away.

"Come on, children," Ona Nobis spoke at last. She bared her teeth. "You can do better."

Obi-Wan catapulted forward. He worked in tandem with Siri now, the two of them flanking the bounty hunter. This time when she furled her whip he leaped high to meet it, corkscrewing his lightsaber around and around so that the whip would tangle momentarily. He knew that Siri would take the opportunity to attack.

Blaster fire pinged next to him. It was very close. He hung in the air, holding on to the whip, every muscle straining.

She tried to twist the whip out of his grasp. Her strength was extraordinary. He felt his wrist wrench and he began to fall. The whip spiraled out, free again. He used his fall to twist one more time and surprise her with a roundhouse kick. Her second blaster flew from her hand and she let out a howl of rage.

Jude Watson

Siri bounded forward to join him as he landed. Now they had her cornered. She restored the whip to normal mode and sent it flying high to wrap around a drainpipe nearby.

He saw that she meant to escape. She never stayed if she felt she was losing. She pulled herself up and over Obi-Wan and Siri, using the whip to propel herself high above their heads. For a moment her body hung motionless in the dark night sky.

She was holding on with one hand. What was she doing with the other?

"Siri, watch out!" Obi-Wan cried, as a third blaster appeared in Ona Nobis's hand.

At that moment, Adi charged through the door to the roof. She leaped high, slashing at the bounty hunter's whip. She neatly sliced it in two.

A surprised look came over Ona Nobis's tight features. She hung suspended in midair for one quick moment. Then, without the whip's support, she tumbled over backward and fell through the inky night far, far below.

Chapter Twenty-One

Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, Siri, and Adi stood outside the small building near the Senate on Coruscant.

"Ready?" Astri called.

"Ready," Qui-Gon answered.

Astri flipped a switch. Halo-lights glowed, spelling out

D I I ' S N E W C A F

Astri sighed. "I guess it still needs work. That's what I get for using Fligh as an electrician."

"At least the food is good," Cholly said. He held up a chunk of spicy ahrisa. "This is the best I ever tasted."

"Mmmph," Tup agreed, his mouth full. Weez handed him a napkin.

Astri beckoned the Jedi inside and placed them at a center table. She poured tea for them.

"I don't like having Fligh as a partner, but he promised he would go straight," Astri said. "And he did find investors for us."

The cup stopped halfway to Qui-Gon's mouth. "Legitimate investors?"

"Of course!" Didi bustled forward from the bar. He had lost some weight during his illness, but had regained his rosy cheeks and merry temperament. "Fligh and I have learned our lesson."

Jude Watson

"I hope so," Astri murmured. "All I know is, I'm keeping the financial records."

"I'm sure you'll be a great success," Adi said, toasting her.

Astri sat down at the table with them. "Have they set the punishment for Zan Arbor and S'orn?"

Qui-Gon nodded. "They have been exiled to a prison world for the rest of their lives."

"I can't believe Uta S'orn was an accomplice," Astri said, shaking her head. "Her best friend killed her son, and she still continued to do business with her!"

"Never underestimate the power of greed," Adi said soberly. "Uta S'orn wanted to make a fortune. Jenna Zan Arbor offered her that opportunity. She was the backing behind the scientific company on Belasco."

"Their plans nearly went awry when Zan Arbor was sidetracked by her interest in the Force," Qui-Gon added. "The fact that her friend had a Force-sensitive son was too tempting for Zan Arbor to resist. And when Uta S'orn found out what happened, her greed overcame her anger and grief."

"They are quite a pair," Siri said, grimacing.

Astri got up to fix the lunch she had promised to the Jedi. Siri beckoned to Obi-Wan and drew him into a quiet corner.

"I just wanted to say I was glad to see you turn up on the roof to help me fight Ona Nobis," she said. "I guess I thought less of you for fleeing the battle on Sorrus. I did not understand how powerful she was. She could have killed me, Obi-Wan."

"I cannot imagine that," Obi-Wan said. The embarrassment on Siri's face made him want to smooth over the situation. "You are the best Padawan fighter I've ever seen."

"Except for you," Siri said. "I have fought you in Temple exercises many times, Obi-Wan. I should not have questioned your ability or your nerve. I was wrong." The words seemed torn from her reluctantly.

"I have been wrong myself," Obi-Wan said lightly. "As well you know."

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"Adi says I have learned an important lesson," Siri went on. She made a wry face. "And I hate learning lessons. I thought too much of my own abilities. Even though I'm a Jedi, I am not invincible. There are many in the galaxy who can defeat me. Now I understand why we were taught over and over that our motive must be sure, our concentration total.

I underestimated the dark side of the Force. I will try not to do that again. And I know now that I will not always be strong. I will not be afraid to recognize when I am weak."

"An important lesson for Padawans," Adi said, overhearing them.

Obi-Wan threw a glance at Qui-Gon. "And for stubborn Jedi Masters."

Qui-Gon took a placid sip of tea. "I have no idea who you mean," he said, his eyes twinkling.

Book Fourteen
The Ties That Bind

Chapter One

The air was thin and sharp on this world. It had taken Obi-Wan Kenobi almost a full day to get used to it. Now he enjoyed the bite of fresh, cold air in his lungs.

He and his Master, Qui-Gon Jinn, were high in the mountains of Ragoon-6, one of a cluster of planets that were known for their spectacular, remote beauty. The two Jedi's mission was simply to survive. They took no more than their survival packs. Another Jedi had left a trail for them to follow to a transport. The trail led over snow, high cliffs, and huge sheets of rock, so it was not easy to follow.

Qui-Gon had decided on the test after their last mission. Upon their return to the Temple, he had seemed distracted, almost moody, which wasn't like him. At last he had appeared in the doorway of Obi-Wan's quarters one morning at dawn.

"It's time for some amusement," he said.

Amusement? Obi-Wan had never heard his Master use that word. He had pushed himself up on his elbows sleepily, blinking in the dim light. He wondered if he was dreaming.

Only an hour later he found himself on a transport headed to Ragoon- 6. A Jedi pilot named Rana dropped them off on a high, windy plain. Qui-Gon explained that they would be testing their survival and tracking skills, while also seeing some of the most

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astonishing scenery in the galaxy. Obi-Wan had felt cold and hungry and doubtful at the time. But for the past ten days, he had enjoyed himself thoroughly.

Obi-Wan sat on a flat rock overlooking the valley below. It was mid-morning, and the sun had already warmed the rock underneath him. He pressed his bare hands against it. Below him he could see a sea of bright yellow wildflowers in a mountain meadow. The sky here was very blue. At night it turned purple. During one storm, it had streaked yellow and green. Obi-Wan had never seen such deep, clear colors in the atmosphere. There were no cities on Ragoon-6, no industry or transports to give off emissions to cloud the pure air.

He and his Master hadn't spoken much. Qui-Gon was in a reflective mood. There were times that he seemed... not tense, Obi-Wan thought, searching for the right word, but distracted. Obi-Wan knew that Qui-Gon had something on his mind, but he also knew that it was not time for his Master to share it.

Obi-Wan was sixteen years old now, and his relationship with his Master was making a subtle shift. They were growing to be companions, as well as pupil and teacher. Obi-Wan knew he still had much to learn from Qui-Gon, but he enjoyed this new feeling of maturity. For the first time he could see the day when he would stand next to his Master as a full Jedi Knight.

He heard the crunch of his Master's footsteps over the snow. Qui-Gon squatted down beside him. His eyes swept the landscape below. "Tahl and I came here on a training mission like this one, long ago," he said. "We always said we would come back together. We never did."

Tahl was a Jedi Knight who had gone through Temple training with Qui-Gon. She was a renowned Knight now, and their friendship was deep and long. She had been blinded a few years before, and Obi-Wan could always pick up a strain of tenderness when Qui-Gon spoke of her.

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Qui-Gon's blue eyes scanned the mountains and valley. "We are here now and gone in a moment of time," he said quietly. "You must be sure of what you want and believe, Obi-Wan."

Sometimes the way will be confused, but allow yourself the time to understand yourself. Take yourself out of your life if you must."

Obi-Wan nodded, but Qui-Gon's words seemed vague to him. Usually Qui-Gon's advice was clear and direct. Even his gaze was faraway.

Then, in one of the shifts in concentration that marked his character, Qui-Gon abruptly stood, his concentration clear now. "Something is tracking us," he said briskly.

"Something?"

"Animals. No doubt they are tracking us for food. The tracks indicate that it is a pack of malia."

"Malia?"

"Fierce beasts that live in the high country. They are not large – they travel on all fours, and come up to your knees, but they are very dangerous. It is said that if you are close enough to hear the cry of a malia, you are already dead."

Despite the bright sun, Obi-Wan shivered. "And they are tracking us?"

"It has been a hard winter here. It is better to avoid them. Let's go."

Qui-Gon slung his survival pack over his shoulder and began to walk. Obi-Wan hurried to gather his things and follow. They spent the next hour hiking over sheer rock, which led them to forest trails. The trail left by the Jedi was difficult, but with eyes sharpened by the Force they were able to pick up the minute differences in soil, leaves, and snow that indicated a presence had passed. They were able to move quickly. Obi-Wan hoped they were putting kilometers between themselves and the malia pack.

Suddenly, Qui-Gon stopped ahead. Obi-Wan could see that the trail now forked into two paths. The two Jedi studied the area, then split up to travel a short distance up each path, looking

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for clues. They did not need to confer; they had been through this process many times before.

Usually, either Qui-Gon or Obi-Wan found a clue as to which path to take. This time, they returned to the fork without a clear idea of which way to go. A probe or tracking droid would have been helpful, but this exercise was designed to teach Obi-Wan how to survive without them.

"Rana has given us a challenge," Qui-Gon said. "We have to pick a path and then travel back if it is the wrong one."

Obi-Wan nodded.

"If we have to double back, we'll lose the time we gained," Qui-Gon said. "We could run into the malia pack. Why don't you choose a trail?"

Obi-Wan stared at the two paths. Neither gave him an overwhelming feeling. He chose the right, which rose steeply up a rocky hill. Perhaps Rana had wanted them to work a little harder.

They walked for an hour without picking up any further clues. Finally, Qui-Gon stopped.

"I think we should head back, Padawan. We should have seen some indication before this that this path was the correct one." Qui-Gon scanned the sky. "It will be dark soon."

The going was tougher in the gathering dusk. The temperature had dropped, causing ice pockets to form in the rocky trail. They headed downhill, using all their concentration to avoid slipping.

As they drew near their starting point, Obi-Wan heard a high-pitched scream. He stopped abruptly.

"It's not human," he said. "At least, I don't think so."

"It's the cry of the malia," Qui-Gon said. "It sounded close."

Obi-Wan did not hear fear in his Master's voice – he never did – but Qui-Gon didn't sound too comfortable, either. "Do you fear them?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Not exactly," Qui-Gon said. "I respect them. If we run across them, Padawan, remember that they are very fast. Very

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cunning. When they hunt, they have a highly developed sense of strategy."

They continued down the slope, now walking as silently as possible. Obi-Wan did not disturb a rock or leaf.

"As soon as we find somewhere suitable, we should stop for the night," Qui-Gon said in a low tone. "The delay will not hurt us. And a fire will protect us."

Obi-Wan did not hear or see any movement around them. The surrounding trees pressed close to the path here, with feathery blue-green leaves that did not stir. Yet he had the sense they were being stalked. Despite the cold, he felt a trickle of sweat break loose from the hair at the back of his neck.

The shadows of the leaves lengthened, dimming the path ahead. He could barely glimpse the fork where they had stopped. There was a clearing there where they could make camp.

Off to his right, he saw a flash of green, a fluorescent color strangely out of place in the natural hues of the forest. He was about to point it out to Qui-Gon when his Master suddenly drew his lightsaber.

"Malia!" Qui-Gon warned.

A split second later Obi-Wan saw a blur of blue-gray fur as an animal bounded out of the trees toward them. Now he knew the origin of that odd green flash. It was the eyes of the malia, gleaming with the fever of the kill. The malia was perhaps knee-high to Qui-Gon, lean and rangy. Obi-Wan was startled by the ugliness of the face, with its tapered snout and yellow teeth sharpened into lethal points.

Obi-Wan's lightsaber was in his hand, and he jumped back to protect Qui-Gon. At the same time, another creature darted from the trees on the opposite side. And then a third, and a fourth, and a fifth. They moved quickly, so fast they seemed to change shape. They circled, snapping their teeth at the Jedi's whirling light-sabers, but always staying out of reach. Their movements

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seemed choreographed to tire their prey. They kept the Jedi moving with the constant threat.

"They are playing with us," Qui-Gon said, turning to protect himself from a rear assault from two malia.

Obi-Wan gritted his teeth. "I can't wait for them to get serious."

"Careful, Padawan. Do not let them get close. If a malia gets its teeth into your wrist, it can rip off your arm."

"That's reassuring," Obi-Wan muttered.

"If we keep them at bay, they might give up and look for easier prey," Qui-Gon said. He whirled and twisted in a fast combination, driving off three malia that had joined forces to attack.

Obi-Wan saw another blur out of the corner of his eye, and turned to meet the threat. A malia had launched itself from the branch of a tree, straight at Qui-Gon. Obi-Wan leaped forward, his lightsaber a blue glow against the lowering sky.

He saw the malia bare its yellow teeth at him in a frustrated snarl. It twisted in midair to land nearby, safely away from Qui-Gon.

Another malia streaked toward the trees. Now they would be attacked from above as well as the ground. Obi-Wan's foot slid on a patch of ice and he went down on one hand. Qui-Gon leaped forward to cover him, but not before a malia sprang forward, alert for any weakness. Obi-Wan saw the malia's sharp teeth reach for his outstretched hand. He flipped over and risked a quick kick to the animal's flank. He summoned the Force behind it, and the surprised animal flew back across the path, snarling and spitting.

Obi-Wan quickly regained his feet. He was breathing hard. He had never encountered such quickness in an animal before. The malia were relentless. The sound of their cries was bloodcurdling.

A malia suddenly dropped from a tree branch, leaping toward Qui-Gon, while two others attacked from the rear. Qui-Gon whirled, his lightsaber unstoppable. In a moment, the leaping

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malia was dead on the forest floor and the other two reversed their course. Qui-Gon caught one as it turned to attack again. It fell in a heap of fur.

The other malia stayed a few meters away, snarling at Qui-Gon. Obi-Wan saw its muscles bunch in preparation for a leap. Suddenly, its eyes rolled back and it fell dead.

Obi-Wan glanced at Qui-Gon. He saw that his Master was just as mystified as he was. As if they had silently communicated a signal, the rest of the malia suddenly streaked toward the cover of the woods.

"What happened?" Obi-Wan asked, his eyes roaming the surroundings to make sure the malia were truly gone.

"We'll know in a moment."

Suddenly the leaves parted and a group of beings appeared. They were short, with leathery brown skin and powerful chests. Their faces were covered in thick hair, their ears long and pointed. They held weapons Obi-Wan had never seen before, long tubes made out of polished stone. He guessed that they were a form of blowpipe.

"Don't move," Qui-Gon told Obi-Wan calmly. One of the beings stepped forward and spoke in Basic.

"You will have a more pleasant death at our hands than the malia," he said. "Our poisons are quick." He made a signal and gestured to the others. The tribe put their blow tubes to their lips.

"You are welcome to the malia," Qui-Gon said. There was no hint of hurry or distress in his tone. "We are only visitors to your world, on the way to our transport. We thank you for saving our lives."

The leader held up a hand. The blow tubes were not dropped, but the tribe watched the Jedi warily.

"You do not want the malia meat?" the leader asked.

"We have our own supplies, food from our own world," Qui-Gon said. "We are not here to hunt"

The leader studied them a moment. "Then pass on."

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Obi-Wan was only too glad to do so. He did not want to turn his back on the tribe, but he noted how easily Qui-Gon did so. He followed his Master's lead. Together they skirted the three dead malia and headed down the other path.

"That was lucky," Obi-Wan breathed when they were out of earshot.

"This is beautiful country, but a hard one," Qui-Gon said. "I know the tribes use the malia for the food and skins they provide. They are hard to kill, and very valuable. That was their main concern. Most beings in the galaxy do not kill without purpose. If you can discover what that purpose is, you can forestall a battle."

"And those who kill but have no reason?"

"They are the ones to worry about. Now, Padawan, we should..."

Suddenly, Qui-Gon stopped short. He closed his eyes.

Obi-Wan waited. Something had disturbed his Master. He could see it as well as feel it. Qui-Gon seemed to weave for a moment, as if rocked by something deep inside.

When he opened his eyes, Obi-Wan could not read his clouded expression, but he could sense Qui-Gon was troubled.

"What did you see?" he asked.

Qui-Gon's lips pressed together. "It is dangerous to interpret visions," he said curtly. "We must return to Coruscant immediately."

Chapter Two

Immediately took too long to suit Qui-Gon. It had taken them another three days to get to the transport. Time and again Qui-Gon had meditated for patience, but he could not find it. He knew he was pushing Obi-Wan, but it was not to teach his Padawan endurance. It was because of his own anxiety.

The vision had come without warning. One moment he was hiking down the trail, and the next Tahl had appeared before him. She had been in great distress.

On this trip Tahl had been so often in his thoughts. Was this the reason? Did Tahl need him? Or did his own thoughts summon the vision?

The pilot pushed the transport to its fastest speed. It was another seven-hour journey to Coruscant. Each minute seemed to tick by in crisp eternities.

Obi-Wan was silent during the journey. They had come to understand each other over the years. Obi-Wan knew when Qui-Gon needed silence.

Qui-Gon didn't know why the disturbing vision of Tahl had appeared. He only knew that he had to get back to the Temple and make sure she was safe.

At last they entered the atmosphere of Coruscant. The tall spires of the multilevel city came into view. Qui-Gon swung the

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craft into the fastest lane, cutting off a larger transport. Obi-Wan looked at him, startled, but Qui-Gon merely pushed the engines to go faster.

He landed the craft and activated the ramp.

He stood, but for the first time in four days he hesitated before moving.

"I'm sorry for my haste, Obi-Wan. I'll explain one day." *When I understand this myself.*

He didn't give his Padawan a chance to reply, but turned and hurried down the ramp. He would leave Obi-Wan the chore of arrival procedures.

He strode through the door and stopped at the security checkpoint, where Jedi Knight Cal-i-Vaun was stationed.

"I need to find Jedi Knight Tahl," Qui-Gon said.

Cal-i-Vaun quickly touched the screen in front of him. "She is not in her quarters. One moment." He touched another point on the screen. "She is not answering her comlink."

"Thank you." Even the simple courtesy cost him an effort to remember. "Is she here at the Temple?" he barked.

"Yes, I show no record of departure."

Qui-Gon's fingers drummed on the desk. He did not have the patience to search the Temple. There were only a few places Tahl could be where she would turn off her comlink. She was either meditating or swimming in the lake or...

Or in the Jedi Council Room.

Qui-Gon hurried to the turbolift and took it straight to the Council Room. The doors were closed. The Council was in session. Qui-Gon broke a revered Temple rule and accessed the doors without requesting entrance. He strode in.

Tahl stood in the middle of the circle. She turned at the sound of the opening door. Even without her sight she knew his presence immediately. Qui-Gon was so glad to see her he did not mind her frown.

Yoda blinked at him impassively, but Mace Windu's eyebrows lowered.

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"To what do we owe this... intrusion, Qui-Gon?" Mace Windu asked.

"I apologize to all the Jedi Masters," Qui-Gon said, bowing. "I knew Tahl was here, and I felt I had to be present."

To his surprise, Mace Windu nodded, as though Qui-Gon's reason was logical.

"We will allow you to remain, seeing that you have a connection to this mission," he said. "We would have requested your presence had we known you had returned."

Qui-Gon hid his surprise. Tahl clasped her hands in front of her for a moment. Beneath the folds of her long robe, he saw her long fingers clench and unclench. She was not happy he had interfered, that was clear.

Her voice was calm when she spoke, however. "I will resume the briefing," she said, angling her body slightly so that Qui-Gon was now slightly behind her. It effectively demonstrated to the Masters her desire to remain the focus of the meeting. "I received a distress call this morning from the twin sisters Alani and Eritha from the planet New Apsolon. "

Now Qui-Gon understood Mace Windu's reaction to his presence. Years ago, Tahl and Qui-Gon had been sent on a mission to Apsolon. They had been sent as Jedi observers to ensure a peaceful transition of government.

"Let me review my last mission there," Tahl said. "Apsolon used to have a totalitarian government ruling over a civilization split between a prosperous minority called the Civilized and a majority called the Workers. The Workers lived in a separate sector of the city in poor housing and had to pass through checkpoints at an energy wall to travel to work. The Civilized kept control through a feared and hated secret police, called the Absolutes. As no doubt members of the Council are aware, Apsolon is a center of the high-tech industry. The Workers tried to achieve what they called a 'bloodless revolution' through a campaign of industrial sabotage. The civil war was conducted with some violence, but nowhere near as bad as we have seen on

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other worlds. Mostly the violence came from the Absolutes as they tried to stop the sabotage and demonstrations. But the Workers were not stopped. The economic pressures forced the government to call for free elections and give each Worker a vote. As a result, a Worker leader who had been a hero to the people, Ewane, was elected. Apsolon was renamed New Apsolon to symbolize this new direction."

Qui-Gon remembered Ewane well, as well as his two daughters. Ewane had been imprisoned for many years. The girls' mother had died when they were young, so they had been raised by his supporters. They had been pretty, quiet girls who had looked at Tahl with awe and brought out a tenderness in Tahl he had rarely seen.

"Ewane ruled for five years as Supreme Governor and was reelected," Tahl went on. "Shortly after this, he was murdered."

Qui-Gon closed his eyes in a moment of remembrance. Tall, elegant Ewane had been frail from his years of captivity, but his inner strength had given him an aura of nobility. His sense of loyalty and purpose had made him an ideal leader. He had been committed to bringing justice, not punishment, to his former enemies. How sad that he hadn't been given a chance to fulfill his great promise.

"His successor is his close associate, Roan, who was one of the few Civilized who called early on for social change. Roan was admired by most of the population at one time, but now many among the Workers believe he backed Ewane's killers and took the office in a coup. The planet has plunged into instability once again. Ewane's daughters, Alani and Eritha, are now sixteen. They are in hiding and fear for their lives. They have appealed to me for help. They want safe passage to Coruscant. I must go to New Apsolon and escort them."

"A worthy mission," Mace Windu said. "Of course the girls must be rescued."

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"Sad it is that the planet is plunged into chaos once more," Yoda said. "Ask for our help the government itself does not, however. Therefore unofficial, your mission is."

"I owe the girls my loyalty," Tahl said. "I must go."

Qui-Gon was not surprised at Tahl's determination. She had formed a close bond with the young twins. They had been the cause of a serious disagreement between the two Jedi. Once the elections were held and Ewane had been elected, Qui-Gon had been ready to leave the planet. Tahl had been concerned about Ewane and his family's safety, and felt the new government was too fragile and new to trust. There were still powerful factions among the rich minority that wanted it to fail, and she suspected that the Absolutes had not disbanded, as had been promised, but were still working in an underground capacity. Qui-Gon had agreed that some of this might be true, but it was not the Jedi's job to remain as an occupation force.

They had argued over whether to remain or go. Privately Qui-Gon had felt that Tahl's connection to Eritha and Alani was influencing her feeling. The motherless girls had come to depend on her. But in the end, Qui-Gon prevailed, and they left the planet.

Was this the source of Tahl's coolness to him now? He could feel it like a presence in the room. Did she remember their quarrel? Did she feel justified now? The girls were in danger. Perhaps if the Jedi had remained to clear out the last nest of Absolutes, Ewane would not have been murdered.

Perhaps. There was no way to know. And lately there had been tension between Tahl and Qui-Gon that did not have to do with missions. It was a tension he did not completely understand. Tahl had taken the Jedi student named Bant as her Padawan, but had not entirely accepted her as a partner, often leaving to go on missions alone. She knew that Qui-Gon disapproved of this. He knew how capable she was and was astonished at how she compensated for her blindness. Still he feared that a situation

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could arise in which she would overestimate her abilities. Her need to go on missions alone distressed him.

No matter how he chided himself, he could not stop feeling protective toward Tahl. It was not because of her blindness. It was because of her need to prove her blindness did not matter.

"We will arrange for a transport and pilot to be ready," Mace Windu told Tahl. "We request that you keep in touch with us frequently, since you are going alone."

"I am willing to go with Tahl on this mission," Qui-Gon said quickly. "Since I, too, know the situation well, I can be of help."

"There is no need for Qui-Gon to accompany me," Tahl said. "I have a contact on New Apsolon. I should be able to collect the girls and return in a matter of days."

Qui-Gon nodded in Tahl's direction. "Respectfully, I must point out that the Jedi made enemies on Apsolon. There were some on both sides who did not welcome us. The Civilized blamed us for the election of a Worker. The Workers blamed us for supporting neutral trials for war criminals. Tahl could be in danger."

"I do not think that this warrants another Jedi presence – " Tahl began, but Yoda interrupted her.

"Made his point, Qui-Gon has," he said. "A good one, it is. Yet wish you do not a companion on this journey, and true it is that it will be a short one. Suggest I do that you conceal your identity upon your arrival."

Tahl looked relieved. "I can do that."

Qui-Gon opened his mouth to speak, but Yoda gave him a piercing glance.

"Settled it is, then," Yoda said.

Qui-Gon could do nothing more than follow Tahl from the room. He could not share his disturbing vision with the Council. He would not share it with Tahl. Jedi did not feel that visions should necessarily govern behavior. They were easily misinterpreted and were sometimes grounded in inner fears that

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one did not fully understand. It would be of no use for Qui-Gon to explain his anxiety.

As soon as they exited the chamber, Tahl turned to him. "I don't know why you insisted on interfering like that, Qui-Gon" she said. "But I do not like it."

"I was on the original mission," Qui-Gon replied. "I thought I could be of help."

She turned to him. Her unusual striped green-gold eyes were just as piercing as they'd ever been. One arched eyebrow lifted.

"Tell me. Did you know that New Apsolon was the subject of that meeting when you arrived?"

Qui-Gon could not lie to Tahl. "No. I did not."

Her face tightened. "Then it is as I thought. You will not allow me to act as a full Jedi Knight. Because I am blind, you think I need a caretaker."

"No – "

In a rare show of anger, she stamped her foot. Her caramel skin flushed with pink. "Then what? Why do you keep insisting on interfering?"

"Friendship."

One corner of her full mouth lifted. "Then in the name of friendship, dear Qui-Gon, leave me be."

She turned abruptly toward the turbolift. He felt the drift of her soft robe against his hand as she moved, and then she was gone.

Chapter Three

Matters that took place in the Jedi Council were private, but it was not difficult for Obi-Wan to discover what had happened in the Council Room. Tahl had briefed Bant, her Padawan, and a disturbed Bant had confided in Obi-Wan. He heard that Qui-Gon had barged in without an invitation and had asked to accompany Tahl on her mission. He knew that the Council and Tahl had refused.

Bant was upset that once again Tahl had left her behind. True, the mission was a short one, but Bant struggled not to feel that Tahl did not trust her fully.

"I must learn to accept the way she is and believe that she knows best," Bant told Obi-Wan as they walked around the lake early one morning. The illumination banks overhead simulated a soft dawn. "But it's so hard. I thought that at last we were beginning to become full partners. She seemed to rely on me more. She went on fewer missions alone. I think Yoda might have spoken to her about leaving me behind. Yet now I find that she has gone off with only a few words to me."

If Qui-Gon had done the same, Obi-Wan knew he would be as upset as Bant. Perhaps more so. He had been with Qui-Gon longer than Bant had been with Tahl. They had had opportunities to work out the various bumps in their

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relationship. Bant had a rockier time. Tahl was kind and humorous, but she kept a part of herself aloof.

"It took years for Qui-Gon and me to develop our closeness," Obi-Wan tried to reassure her. "The only thing I can advise is patience. Just as you once advised me."

"I don't get the chance to be close to Tahl," Bant said. "I'm too busy sitting here at the Temple without her."

Obi-Wan understood a bit of her distress. For the first time in a long while, he did not know what his Master was thinking.

In the days since Tahl had left, Qui-Gon's restlessness had deepened. Obi-Wan could see it. His Master had already decided to follow their tracking and survival exercise with physical training at the Temple. Qui-Gon threw himself into this without a break. He studied with the Jedi Masters, perfecting his battle skills, his endurance, his strength. Obi-Wan would often have to remind him to eat his evening meal. Qui-Gon looked tired and depleted.

"There is distance between me and Qui-Gon right now," Obi-Wan confided. "I don't understand it, but I know I will in time. Qui-Gon has told me that each of us is still an individual. We will have worries and concerns that are unique to us. We cannot expect to always understand each other. The commitment is what is important."

"But is that commitment important to Tahl?" Bant asked. Her silver eyes searched his.

"I think it is," Obi-Wan answered. "She is a Jedi."

"The mission was supposed to take two or three days at the most," Bant said worriedly. "It has been almost two weeks now."

Obi-Wan put his hand on Bant's shoulder. His words could not help her. He only hoped his presence could.

Qui-Gon tried to lose himself in training. If he worked his body hard enough, he could push worry aside for short periods. But the weeks passed, and the nagging feeling that Tahl needed him still preyed on his mind. She had not checked in with the

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Council. This was not unusual. Events happened that could prevent contact on any mission. Yoda had told him with unusual sternness that the Council was not worried.

He was the only one who worried. But did that mean he was wrong?

All he could see were her eyes. Usually they blazed like green crystals with traces of gold. Now they were black and dull, filmed with suffering.

When she saw him, they sparked to life. "It is too late for me, dear friend," she said.

Qui-Gon woke with a start. He put his hand on his heart. The grief that filled him was because of the dream. It was not real. He told his beating heart to slow down.

This grief was temporary. It was already fading as his heartbeat slowed. But the vision – the vision was real.

He swung his legs over the edge of the sleep-couch. *Enough*, he told himself. Enough of trying to convince himself the vision had been more about his anxiety about Tahl than anything real. Enough of respecting her request to leave her be.

Enough.

He waited until after the meditation period, when the Council members gathered for a short meeting. Then he headed toward the Council chamber.

He ran into Obi-Wan, who was on his way to the morning meal. His Padawan knew immediately that he had a purpose. Obi-Wan looked at him questioningly.

"I'm on my way to the Council Room," Qui-Gon said.

"Tahl?"

He nodded.

"I'll come with you."

He was about to argue, but he saw the resolute look in Obi-Wan's eyes. He kept on walking, and Obi-Wan swung into step beside him.

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This time, Qui-Gon took the time to request permission to enter. He needed the Council on his side. It was granted.

He strode into the room, suddenly glad to have Obi-Wan with him.

"I wish to inform the Council that I am following Tahl to New Apsolon," he said without preliminaries.

"What is the reason for this action?" Mace Windu asked. He knitted his long fingers together and frowned at Qui-Gon.

"Tahl promised to keep in contact with the Council. She has not. It has been nearly three weeks since she left. She said she would be back in under a week."

"Jedi Knights are not required to conform to a schedule," Mace Windu said. "And missions reveal their own time frame. The Council members are not concerned."

"But I am," Qui-Gon stated firmly. "Complete this mission alone, Tahl wanted," Yoda said. "Best it is for her, we think."

"I have tried to honor her wishes," Qui-Gon said. "I feel that there is danger there. I have seen it."

"A vision?" Yoda asked. "Know you do that visions can lead us astray as well as guide us."

"This one must guide me," Qui-Gon said.

"You know that secrecy is crucial to Tahl's mission," Mace Windu said. "She could have already started her journey. She could have the twins with her. We will wait for her next communication."

"I will not," Qui-Gon said.

Yoda exchanged a glance with Mace Windu. It was clear they were surprised and displeased.

"Noted we have your concern for Tahl over the years since she was blinded," Yoda said. "Natural, it is. But good for her, it is not. Find her own way, she must."

"I am going," Qui-Gon insisted.

"Qui-Gon," Mace Windu warned, "you are not listening to our counsel. It is clear that you made a decision and will not be swayed. It is not like you to close your mind, nor is it like a Jedi."

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Qui-Gon said nothing. He would not argue with Mace Windu. But he would not abandon his plan.

"You must open your mind to other opinions. We sit here on the Council because our vision is a wider one than that of any individual Jedi. "

Qui-Gon stirred impatiently. "I am wasting time," he said.

Obi-Wan looked at him, startled. Qui-Gon knew he had been rude, but he was on fire to leave the Temple. No matter what the Council said, he was going.

Mace Windu looked thunderous. "Counsel with us is wasting your time?" He pointed his finger at Qui-Gon. "Know this, Qui-Gon Jinn. If you leave to find Tahl, you do it against our wishes and direction."

It was the strongest condemnation Mace Windu could give, short of forbidding it. Qui-Gon nodded curtly. He turned and left the chamber, feeling Obi-Wan at his heels.

He did not stop but stepped immediately on the turbolift. Obi-Wan had to jump to accompany him.

"I have never seen you act so impolite," Obi-Wan said, running both hands through his hair. "You defied Mace Windu!"

The turbolift opened. Qui-Gon strode out.

"Qui-Gon, wait. Can't you talk to me?"

He stopped and turned. His Padawan's face was full of worry. He could see how torn he was. Obi-Wan did not understand how a vision could touch you so deeply that it was as though the real world dropped away and you were living in another reality. Qui-Gon had to get to Tahl. He had to see her, grasp her hands, look into her face. He had to know she was alive.

"You are going to New Apsolon today?" Obi-Wan asked.

"As soon as I can arrange transport."

"Then I will get my survival pack and meet you at the landing platform."

Qui-Gon took a breath to compose himself. "No, Padawan," he said as gently as he could. "You must remain behind. I cannot ask you to defy the Council on my behalf."

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"You are not asking me," Obi-Wan said. "There are reasons to stay. I will not be gone long."

"That is what Tahl said."

Qui-Gon sighed. "Unlike Tahl, I will remain in touch with you. I will call for you if I need you." He held Obi-Wan's gaze. "You know that I will. "

Obi-Wan's gaze did not falter. Qui-Gon could see that his Padawan did not understand. Yet he would not back down.

"My place is by your side," Obi-Wan said. Qui-Gon took a deep breath. "Then let us depart."

Chapter Four

Before landing on New Apsolon, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan changed from their Jedi tunics into the common street wear of travelers, hooded short robes of dark cloth with leather trousers tucked into boots. Qui-Gon would be careful to wear his hood while on the planet. He did not think many would remember him, but he would take no chances.

They set down their craft at a landing pad on the outskirts of the capital city, also called New Apsolon. The city was a large one, spread out over many kilometers. The rest of the small planet was devoted to its second-largest industry, harvesting the gray stone that was used in most of the buildings. There were a few small cities and villages, but the majority of the population lived in the teeming capital city.

They paid the owner to hold the transport, then took a turbolift to the surface of the planet.

They arrived in the Worker Sector of the city. The buildings were no taller than six stories, many built cheaply of durasteel. Others were built of native gray stone with small windows and rounded roofs. Qui-Gon recognized the style as one for those which sometimes lacked heat in winter. Ahead they could see the tall elegant buildings of the Civilized Sector. Although the Worker Sector was cleaner and better maintained than Qui-Gon

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remembered, its poverty was in marked contrast to the gleaming city they could glimpse ahead.

New Apsolon did not show many of the effects of the civil disturbances that had rocked the government six years before. Qui-Gon had visited worlds that had destroyed their cities through years of conflict. He had seen evidence of ruin – buildings that had been transformed into rubble, formerly blooming squares now mere patches of dirt. New Apsolon showed none of this destruction. The Civilized Sector still gleamed. The city had always been a tech center, and the buildings were tall, impressive structures. Any evidence of street fighting had long since been removed.

One thing Qui-Gon did not remember from his last visit was the presence of slender glass columns about his own height, lit from within. The columns appeared on street corners or in public squares. Sometimes they were arranged in groups; occasionally they stood alone. Some were glowing white, some ice-blue.

"What do you think they are?" Obi-Wan asked. "They don't seem to have any function,"

Qui-Gon recognized a street crossing. "This is where the energy wall to the Civilized Sector used to be." The largest cluster they'd seen yet of the glowing columns stood ahead in a small plaza. "Let's take a closer look at those columns."

The columns were arranged only a few centimeters apart. Together, they formed a tight glowing cube. Near the front of the cube Qui-Gon saw a polished black slab with words chiseled in its smooth surface.

HERE WE COMMEMORATE OUR FELLOW
CITIZENS, WORKERS ALL, FORTY IN NUMBER,
WHO WERE SLAIN BY THE ABSOLUTE FORCES
WHILE ATTEMPTING TO BREACH THE ENERGY
WALL.

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Obi-Wan counted the columns. "There are forty columns. One for each Worker. These are memorials."

"Every spot where a Worker died is commemorated," Qui-Gon guessed.

The two Jedi gazed at the glowing columns. Now they seemed to take on the presence of living beings. Qui-Gon could imagine the forty Workers, striding toward the energy wall. Perhaps their arms had been linked together.

"I remember on our mission to Melida/Daan how shocked I was at the devastation in the city," Obi-Wan said. "Every ruin held so much sadness. You could see the lives lost and disrupted. This feels just as terrible, somehow. The city has not been touched, yet so many beings are gone. And life continues to go on around them." Obi-Wan touched the glass. "It is good to see what has been lost."

"Yes, I feel that, too." Qui-Gon also felt moved by the mute testimony of the standing columns.

They walked on, past the site of the old energy wall. The checkpoint was still standing, a security booth covered in armor. Across the front someone had scrawled...

ROAN KILLS.

As they walked into the Civilized Sector, they saw more evidence of the same graffiti.

ROAN MUST GO *read some.*

EWANE LIVES

ROAN MUST DIE *read others.*

Workers in coveralls were busy trying to scrub the graffiti off the polished stone.

"There is unrest here below the surface," Qui-Gon said.

"I sense it," Obi-Wan agreed. "The people are not easy in their minds."

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The streets became more crowded, the difference between the Civilized and the Workers perfectly clear. The Civilized had all the trappings of wealth – fine clothes and gleaming airspeeders. Since it was the middle of the day, the rich were on the streets, talking in small groups or lingering in the opulent cafes that lined the broad boulevard. The Workers were dressed in plain tunics and trousers and seemed to be hurrying to fulfill duties, not strolling and enjoying the day.

"We must report for a security check," Qui-Gon said. "It is required of all visitors. Just a formality, but perhaps we can learn something."

The government buildings were clustered in one grand neighborhood, all built around a series of interlocking large squares filled with flowers and benches. Unlike the gleaming tall structures around them, the buildings were not very tall and were built with more ornamentation, columns and ledges and sweeping grand staircases leading up to gleaming metal doors.

Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon were welcomed cordially at the front desk of the Administration Services Building, then led to the office of the Chief Security Controller. He was a short, balding man with a powerful chest and shoulders. He stood and nodded.

"I am Balog, your official greeter. Welcome to New Apsolon. We thank you for obeying our check-in procedures promptly. May I ask the purpose of your visit?"

"We have heard of the pleasures of New Apsolon," Qui-Gon said. "We are here as tourists."

Balog nodded. "Tourism has not been forbidden... yet. But I must warn you that the government is close to issuing an official warning to all who plan to travel here. New Apsolon is now a dangerous place for any foreigners. Our leader is under siege, and there is unrest here. Tempers are high. The society is volatile. I cannot guarantee your safety."

"We are not looking for guarantees," Qui-Gon said. "We do not plan to stay long, and we will be careful."

Balog nodded. "Then enjoy your stay."

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Qui-Gon started toward the door, then pretended to hesitate. "You mention that your leader is under siege. We have heard that the former leader was assassinated. Do you feel that Roan is in danger as well?"

"There are some who believe that he placed the order for the death of Ewane," Balog said. "Of course this is false. Yet that is where the danger lies. These people want revenge. We have it under control. Ewane was a great man, but Roan is as well. He is a Civilized with great wealth, yet even before the bloodless revolution he defied members of his party to champion the Workers. I am an example of that. Roan was the one to raise me to this position. He has done the same for others. Roan has support among the Workers. Those who suspect him of murder are a small but vocal minority."

"Ewane's daughters are in hiding, are they not?"

Balog looked surprised. "Not at all. They were taken in by Roan after their father's death. They are living in the official residence, two blocks away."

Chapter Five

Obi-Wan looked at his Master as they left the security building. He could see that Qui-Gon was worried. If the twins were safe, why did they summon Tahl?

"Do you think the twins don't want anyone on Apsolon to know that they are afraid?"

"Most likely," Qui-Gon said. "Still, it is odd that they lied about being in hiding. I think it's time we saw them."

They asked a passerby for directions. Everyone knew where Roan's residence was. It was a gracious building built of the same mellow gray stone, not far away. Qui-Gon threw back his hood as he entered. He knew he would have to give his true identity in order to be allowed to see the twins.

At the security checkpoint, the screen flashed blue and a voice asked for his name. Qui-Gon gave it, explaining that he was friend of Eritha and Alani.

"Step forward for a retinal scan."

Qui-Gon, then Obi-Wan, did so. Qui-Gon didn't object. He was glad to see that the security was tight.

At last the door opened and the two were ushered into the private quarters of the residence. There, two young women waited in a brightly furnished room with a cheerful fire. They were identical, with long, braided blond hair and narrow faces

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enlivened by bright dark eyes. They both broke into dazzling smiles when they saw Qui-Gon.

"Qui-Gon!" they cried together, and hurried toward him.

Qui-Gon bowed. "I was not sure you would remember me."

"Of course we do." Qui-Gon was not sure which one had spoken. Six years ago, Alani had been slightly taller than Eritha, but now they were the same size.

As if recognizing his difficulty, the other girl smiled. "I am Eritha. This is my sister Alani."

"I'm afraid I can't tell you apart," Qui-Gon said.

"It's hard, but in time people can," Eritha replied.

"Some people," Alani amended. "Why are you here on New Apsolon? Is it a Jedi mission?"

"Not exactly. Let me present to you my Padawan, Obi-Wan Kenobi."

"Any friend of yours is one of ours," Alani said. "We will never forget your kindness to us six years ago."

"How is Tahl?" Eritha asked eagerly. "We were hoping she was with you."

"Tahl is on New Apsolon, but I'm afraid I'm not in contact with her yet," Qui-Gon said. "Did you send for her?"

The twins exchanged surprised glances. "No," Alani said. "Why would we do that?"

"You do not feel in danger?" Qui-Gon asked. "Since your father's murder, you might feel that New Apsolon is not safe for you."

"We are safe here with Roan," Eritha said. "He was our father's best friend. He will protect us. We have everything we need here and don't need to go out if we don't wish to. We have private gardens in the back of the residence."

"I see that you are troubled, Qui-Gon," Alani said. "Of course Eritha and I are aware that there are those on New Apsolon who believe Roan had our father assassinated. We do not believe such a thing."

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"Roan has been like a father to us," Eritha said. "After our father's death, we saw his grief.

It was real. He would not allow us to leave this residence. He said he would be our father now." "We are a family," Alani said firmly.

Qui-Gon nodded. He would not challenge the girls' beliefs. But he would not take them as truth, either. He had known the girls at the age of ten, bewildered by their world's conflicts and longing for their father as he spent long years imprisoned. They had been protected by Ewane's followers, who had proven their devotion to their leader by sheltering his daughters. Perhaps they still were unable to cope with the complexities of a world where sabotage and treachery were practiced. The cozy room and private compound told him that they were still sheltered.

"So you haven't heard that Tahl is on New Apsolon?" Qui-Gon asked.

The girls shook their heads.

"If she is, I wish she would come and see us," Alani added.

Qui-Gon nodded. A feeling of dread loomed inside him. If the girls had not called Tahl, who had? And where was she?

Chapter Six

With no leads, Qui-Gon decided that until they thought of a plan of action, observation was their best strategy. They walked past the government buildings, noting the high security. Everyone seemed to be on alert.

Obi-Wan read the inscription on a windowless building nearby. Unlike its graceful neighbors, this one was squat and long. "It's the former headquarters of the Absolutes," he said to Qui-Gon. "It's now a museum."

"Let's go in," Qui-Gon suggested. "It could be that the Absolutes still have power here. Groups such as that find it hard to disband. The more we learn about them the better off we are."

They paid a small fee to enter. They found themselves in a surprisingly tiny hall with a low ceiling. Carved into the stone archway above an entranceway to the rest of the building they read:

ABSOLUTE JUSTICE CALLS FOR ABSOLUTE
LOYALTY

A petite, wiry woman approached them, dressed in a navy tunic and trousers. Her jet-black hair was cropped short, and Obi-Wan noted that her right hand was twisted, the knuckles of the fingers large and knotted.

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"Welcome. I am Irini, your tour guide. All the guides to the museum are former prisoners of the Absolutes. Let's begin the tour."

They followed her underneath the archway and down a long corridor, where she accessed a thick durasteel door. Immediately they found themselves in a cell block. They walked past the deserted security desk through the row of cells.

"Here is where prisoners were detained before undergoing 'reclassification,' which was the Absolute term for torture," Irini explained. Her voice was calm and dispassionate. "Often prisoners were kept waiting without food or water for long periods, to break down their resistance. They were not allowed counsel or contact with their families. If you are visitors to our world, you may have noticed the many memorials, especially in the Worker Sector. The white columns stand for those who gave their lives on the spot. The blue columns memorialize those who were taken by the Absolutes and arrested. There is a column on Teligi Road for me."

Irini stopped before the last cell. "I was held here for three days, then moved to the reclassification area. I was a prisoner for a total of six months."

"Why were you arrested?" Obi-Wan asked. Since Irini was a tour guide, he assumed it would be all right to ask such a question.

"In addition to my job in the tech sector, I ran a Worker newspaper," Irini said. "We wrote about change through peaceful protest. Our venture was not illegal, but the Absolutes accused us of advocating violence. The charges were false. They were afraid of our influence with the other Workers. Technically the Workers were allowed freedom of expression, but in actuality the Absolutes tried to control what we could say or do."

"Could you vote?" Obi-Wan asked curiously.

"Again, technically yes. But the Civilized Authority – which is what our United Legislature used to be called – placed the oldest voting systems in the Worker Sector. Often the systems broke

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down, or Workers could not register. Votes were not counted. Demands for recounts were refused. Soon we saw that to effect change, we had to take more dramatic means."

"Sabotage," Qui-Gon said.

She nodded. "Yes, that was the principal strategy. When I was released from this place, I joined this movement. We were high-tech workers sending goods out to the galaxy. If the goods were defective, profits would fall. The Civilized were worried about profits above all. Eventually they saw that they had no choice but to negotiate with us. It was a long, hard struggle. Let me show you how hard. Come this way to the torture rooms."

Irini led them through room after room, each one designed for a different kind of detainment or torture. Some rooms were bleakly empty of equipment, yet the thick walls and doors spoke more eloquently than any device of what had been done there. One room held a single object, a coffin like device made of durasteel and plastoid materials. There was a narrow slit at the top.

"This is a sensory deprivation containment device," Irini said quietly. "All of them were destroyed except for this one, which we keep as a reminder of what went on here. Some were kept in the device so long that they went mad. Others were given paralyzing drugs and died inside it."

She led them into another chamber with screens along one wall. Behind them a projector lens protruded from the back wall. "But this is what we feared the most. Here we were forced to watch the torture of others. Sometimes it was people we knew, friends, family. The Absolutes used probe droids largely to monitor the Workers. They kept the vital statistics of all of us on file for easy tracking. They could find anyone if they needed to." Irini stared at the blank screens. "They found out I was engaged to be married and found my fiancé."

Obi-Wan drew in his breath. He could not imagine the kind of mind that would devise such a torture. This time, he did not feel he could ask Irini what had happened.

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Irini glanced at him. "What they did not realize, the Absolutes, was that for the one being tortured it somehow helped to know others were watching. The Absolutes thought only of the pain they could inflict – the double pain of the victim and the watcher, you see. But the victims took courage from the idea that they would be brave for those who knew and loved them. They would withstand anything for love. Probe droids are illegal on New Apsolon now. No one wants to bring back those days again."

She looked back at the screens again. "There were many days in this place that I said goodbye to life. Yet I did manage to survive."

"It must be difficult for you to return," Qui-Gon said. "And yet here you are, giving tours to others."

"Remembering is most important," Irini said. In the dim light, she held up her twisted hand. "I considered myself lucky to leave with only one hand damaged. They broke my hand in order to prevent me from working in the tech sector again. But what they stupidly did not know was that I am left-handed. I was just as fast a worker when I got out. Maybe faster. I had no trouble getting another job." Her smile was unexpectedly brilliant, lighting up her tense, drawn face. "I had a cause to work for."

"Have all the Absolutes been arrested?" Qui-Gon asked.

Irini shook her head as she led them down a catwalk to a lower level, past another row of cells, these with low ceilings so that an adult could not stand upright. They had to duck their heads as she led them inside. Her tunic gaped slightly as she bent, and Obi-Wan saw a small slender chain with a silver emblem around her neck. The delicacy of the jewelry seemed at odds with her brusque manner and severe clothing.

"Not by any means. Many of the former Absolutes went underground. Some were protected by powerful allies among the Civilized. Recently secret records of the Absolutes were found. The government sealed them. That is one thing the Workers are

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still fighting. We want the records opened so that we can know who our enemies were."

"Why were they sealed?" Obi-Wan asked. Irini led them out of the tiny chamber and back to the catwalk. Obi-Wan took a relieved breath that he tried to hide. After only a few seconds in the dark, tiny space, he had felt as though an oppressive weight was on him.

"Those in power say that to release the records would compromise the efforts underway to find the criminals. Also, there were mere bureaucrats in the Absolutes – secretaries, assistants, tech people who were not involved in torture or containment. What kind of punishment do they deserve, if any? The government is afraid that if they release the names of these people, there will be mob rule and a chance for violence out of revenge. They say each person on this list must be investigated before the name is released. There are some among the Workers who do not believe this. They believe it is merely another attempt to shield the criminals. Roan had promised to release the records after he was elected, but has not done so."

"Yet," Qui-Gon said.

"Yet," Irini said. "Or maybe never. He is a Civilized, after all."

She opened the door back into the main area of the building. A draft blew from the empty space, blowing back Qui-Gon's robe. Irini stood, holding the door open, facing him. Her eyes flicked down to his utility belt.

Her dark eyes flared with surprise. "You are a Jedi."

"What makes you think so?" Qui-Gon asked.

"I know a lightsaber when I see one." Irini's gaze ticked over them. "I should have known you weren't just tourists. Why are you here? Did Roan send for you? Are things so dangerous for him on New Apsolon that he feels he needs to call on the Jedi for protection?"

"I get the impression that you do not trust Roan," Qui-Gon said.

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Irini's eyes went flat, and she stared at him coolly. "The Absolutes taught me one thing, stupid as they were," she said. "Trust no one."

Chapter Seven

As they exited the museum, Obi-Wan's mind was full of reflections on what he had seen. He could not imagine Irini's choice to continue to walk into that building and give tours, to return to a place where she had been tortured and abused. Then he remembered Bant. She had almost died in the waterfall pool at the Temple, yet it was still her favorite place to swim. She said it was better to remember than to forget.

But how much remembering was good to do? How did you know when to put memories aside?

He looked over at Qui-Gon, ready to ask the question, but Qui-Gon did not seem in the mood to philosophize. His face was set in grim lines as he walked purposefully down the avenue, even though they had no purpose in mind.

"Something is wrong," Qui-Gon said under his breath. "I can feel her. She is here. She is close. But something is wrong."

Qui-Gon's expression did not change, nor did his pace, but Obi-Wan felt a shift in his concentration.

"Do not turn around, Obi-Wan," Qui-Gon said. "When we come to the end of this avenue, go right. There appears to be an alleyway there. As soon as we turn, look for cover."

"Trouble?" Obi-Wan asked in the same calm tone.

"A probe droid."

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"I thought they were illegal."

"Apparently they are still in use despite this. It could be merely surveillance. It might not be tracking us, but I think it is. Let's find out what it will do."

They reached the alley, and Obi-Wan quickly darted in, Qui-Gon at his heels. Immediately he saw that it was a service area for the buildings on that street. Gravsleds were outside some doors, and a skiff suitable for transporting goods sat in front of a utility entrance.

Without exchanging a word, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan darted behind the skiff. The probe droid zoomed into the alley and revolved, sensors blinking, searching for them.

Qui-Gon did not move. Obi-Wan knew his Master was waiting to see what would happen.

Was the probe droid programmed to keep searching? How determined was the surveillance?

The probe droid zoomed up the alley and back down, searching for movement. The Jedi were trained to keep perfectly still. They did not even blink. They could slow down their breathing and their life processes so that even the sensitive probe droid couldn't pick them up.

The probe droid didn't leave the alley. Slowly it revolved, moving up and down the street.

"It's not going away. Fine," Qui-Gon muttered. "Let's provoke it."

He stood suddenly and strode toward the middle of the alley. The probe droid had picked up the movement immediately and had already revolved and positioned itself to get Qui-Gon back in its sensor range. With a gesture that seemed almost casual, Qui-Gon leaped into the air, activating his lightsaber, and cut through the droid in one smooth motion.

"Now let's see what – " he began, but was cut off by blaster fire from above.

The blaster fire was so close to his Master that Obi-Wan's heart gave a lurch. That did not prevent him, however, from

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activating his own lightsaber and slashing forward to protect him in the same moment. If Qui-Gon's reflexes had been a split second slower, he would have been cut down. As it was, the sleeve of his robe was seared by the blaster heat.

"Stay under cover!" Qui-Gon roared at Obi-Wan. Perhaps Obi-Wan had risked too much to race to his Master's side, but he didn't care. The fire came at them relentlessly from above as they zigzagged down the alley together, keeping their lightsabers arcing above. Trapped in the narrow space, they were easy targets.

"We have to get on the roof above," Qui-Gon said. "Activate your cable launcher when you can."

Obi-Wan had to time his movement to the blasts from above. He needed all his perceptions to keep up his defensive moves. He managed to activate the cable launcher as he moved sideways toward the wall of the building. It propelled him upward as blaster fire pinged around his head.

Obi-Wan leaped up on the roof. He realized that the blaster fire had stopped only seconds before. His gaze whipped around the roof as Qui-Gon jumped up behind him.

"There," Qui-Gon said.

They ran to one edge of the roof, where they could see a small pile of objects. First they searched the area, looking down to see if their attacker had returned to the alley. Then they scanned the roofs nearby to see if he or she had jumped. There seemed to be no avenue of escape that would allow for the attacker to disappear so quickly.

They returned to the pile. Qui-Gon crouched down and picked up a small transmitter.

"For the probe droid. And here's an ammunition pack." He tossed it to Obi-Wan. "Looks like it was only one person. But he or she had two blasters, at least. That was a constant stream of fire."

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Obi-Wan turned the pack over in his hands. It was made of leather. Burned into one side was a small insignia. He crouched down to show it to Qui-Gon.

"I recognize this. Irini wore a necklace with this same emblem."

"At last," Qui-Gon said. "We have somewhere to start."

Chapter Eight

Dusk had fallen and the air had chilled as Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan waited outside the Museum of the Absolutes. They kept their hoods over their heads and stayed in the shadow of a monument directly across from the building.

Soon they were rewarded as various people began to exit the building. They spotted Irini's compact figure immediately. She, too, raised her hood as she hurried down the broad steps and turned down the avenue.

The Jedi melted into the stream of people on the avenue, always keeping Irini in sight. She boarded a repulsorlift-engined airbus and they just managed to jump aboard on the rear platform. Luckily the airbus was crowded. All the Workers were on their way home.

The airbus made no stops as it sped through the boulevards and avenues of the Civilized Sector. It crossed into the Worker Sector and began to make regular stops. Workers exited at various points. Irini stood, her hand lightly resting on a pole, near the middle of the airbus. She stared absently out at the dark streets.

Qui-Gon leaned in to speak to Obi-Wan. "We will have to get off soon, even if Irini doesn't. We can't take the chance that she'll see us. We'll have to follow the airbus on foot."

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It would take some hard running through the crowded streets. Obi-Wan nodded. Better to take the chance that they could lose Irini than be spotted. They knew where she worked; they could always find her again.

Just then Irini began to move toward the exit. The airbus pulled over at the next stop. Qui-Gon made sure Irini had exited before signaling Obi-Wan to jump off the rear platform.

Irini moved quickly through the streets, occasionally exchanging a smile or quick greeting as she walked. The population was busy gathering food for the evening meal, or passing time in small cafes along the route. Mothers and fathers herded children before them, and lights began to come on in Worker housing. They could see families in the middle of their evening routines, children bending over datapads, adults preparing a meal or simply sitting at the window, watching the rest of New Apsolon find their various ways home.

The streets began to narrow, and there were fewer Workers around. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan slowed down, giving Irini a longer lead. She was beginning to use the reflections in darkened windows to look around her.

"Checking for surveillance," Qui-Gon murmured.

Irini crossed the street. With a deft touch to his elbow, Qui-Gon directed Obi-Wan to melt back. They stood in the shadows as, under the pretense of looking for traffic, Irini swept the street with her keen glance. Satisfied that it was empty, she hurried into a plain stone building. It was slated for demolition along with its partner next door. A sign read:

BUILDING A BETTER FUTURE FOR ALL: SITE OF
NEW LUXURY WORKER HOUSING

Qui-Gon did his own careful surveillance before starting across the street, Obi-Wan at his heels. Obi-Wan started toward the door of the building Irini had entered, but Qui-Gon stopped him. He had been studying the building next door.

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"Let's try this one first," he said.

The door was bolted with a strong durasteel lock, but Obi-Wan swiped through it easily with his lightsaber. They pushed the door open and stood for a moment in the dark vestibule.

"I don't want to take a chance with the glow rod," Qui-Gon said. "Wait a moment until your eyes adjust."

Obi-Wan didn't understand how the light of a glow rod would be visible to the next building, but he followed Qui-Gon's lead. In only moments, his eyes had adjusted to the pitch-black interior. He saw that they were in a small foyer. There had once been a datapad station here, most likely for messages and mail for the inhabitants. It had been ripped out, the console parts thrown on the floor. There was a turbolift, but no doubt it was no longer working. A staircase cluttered with debris led above.

Qui-Gon began to climb. "I saw evidence from the outside that some floors here had been enlarged into the adjoining building, probably to expand apartments," he murmured to Obi-Wan. "We might be able to get close enough to Irini to hear what's going on."

Qui-Gon stopped on the first landing, listening intently. Obi-Wan did the same, but heard nothing. They continued upward, stopping at each floor. They climbed five flights before they heard something. It was a soft murmur, nothing more. They moved toward the sound.

It was so faint that they lost its direction a few times. They stood, blocking out the slight noises of the building – the rush of night air through an opening, the skitter of dust along the floor. Then they would pick up the murmur again, and move on.

They walked through abandoned rooms and found evidence of the lives that had been lived there. Narrow sleep-couches, torn and stained. A battered pan on the floor. One boot. A palm-sized datapad that appeared to have melted into the floor. Room after room opened up into the next like a maze. Once, Obi-Wan realized, there had been too many people crowded into these too-small rooms.

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Qui-Gon stopped. "We are now in the other building," he murmured to Obi-Wan. "They are very close."

Obi-Wan could feel the presence of others as well as hear them. But the sound quality was muffled and disorienting. He paused to focus. When they moved, they moved as one. They had both discovered the source of the sound. It was behind a closet. Qui-Gon eased open the door. They saw a crack of light running from the floor to the ceiling. Squeezing inside the closet, they both put their eyes to the crack.

The room next door was lit only by a glow rod set at low power. Yet they could clearly pick out Irini, who sat in a semicircle of other men and women. They were dressed similarly in dark coveralls or tunics.

Now Irini's words came to them clearly.

"I have seen them myself, and I am telling you, they were brought by Roan," she said.

"They admitted to this?" one of the group asked.

"Why should they? They are his tool. The Jedi are sent here to ensure that the government stands. If the government stands as it is, none of the remaining Absolutes will be brought to justice. Therefore they are our enemy."

"With all respect to my fellow Worker Irini, the Jedi were neutral parties six years ago," a quiet-voiced woman said. "They supported the will of the people, whatever that might turn out to be."

"Their role was as peacekeepers only," a man chimed in. "Why are they now our enemy?"

"Because peace is not what we seek," Irini said fiercely. "Justice is. We must overthrow the murderer of Ewane."

Another woman spoke up. "We have agreed that before we plot the overthrowing of Roan we must have evidence of his guilt. We do not have this yet."

"We will," someone else said. "I think Irini is right. The Absolutes have re-formed. We know this. Every day they gain

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power. Roan must be behind it. And if he has sent for the Jedi, they must know it."

"What do you think, Lenz?" the quiet-voiced woman asked.

The man she addressed had not spoken, but Obi-Wan had noticed him. He watched the others with grave, intent eyes. There was a kind of power to him, even though he was hunched over, his hands dangling in his lap. His face was thin, thinner than Irini's. Obi-Wan did not know how he knew this, but he sensed that Lenz had suffered greatly at one time in his life, no doubt at the hands of the Absolutes.

"I have new information," Lenz said. "A new group of leaders have risen in the new Absolute order. No one knows their identity. They are taking pains to conceal them. All we know is that these leaders are clever. Harassment of our movement has begun. Some report an increase in surveillance. We must be careful."

"What does this have to do with Jedi?" someone asked.

"Maybe nothing. Yet both might point to Roan's desperation. First, he backs new leadership within the Absolutes to keep a lid on any opposition. Then, in a show of good faith to the galaxy, he asks for Jedi help. His best interest is to keep things as they are while he consolidates his power."

Even Irini listened to Lenz with respect. "So what should we do?"

"First we should change our meeting place. Every week a new site. Winati, you are in charge of finding a place. Mohn, you are in charge of notifying the others."

Lenz stopped abruptly and picked up his com-link. It must have vibrated, signaling an incoming communication. He listened for a moment, then clicked off.

"The Absolutes. It's a raid."

Lenz's voice held no urgency, but the group rose immediately and moved like a shadow. No one reacted, no one gasped or showed confusion. Obviously, they had trained for this.

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Winati quickly accessed a recessed door in the wall. A staircase led upward. She waited while the others hurried across the floor and disappeared inside, then slipped inside herself. The door slid shut.

"Probably goes to the roof," Qui-Gon murmured. "Let's wait and see who is raiding them."

Moments later, the door burst open. A squad of black-clothed men stood in the doorway, blasters held at their hips. The leader strode forward.

"Too late." He accessed a device on his utility belt.

"Trouble," Qui-Gon murmured, backing up.

The device was a heat sensor. It beamed on the wall they were hiding behind. The wall began to glow.

Obi-Wan scrambled backward, but the close quarters made it difficult for them to move quickly. A moment later a cutting tool swiftly sawed an opening in the wall and a boot followed. The wall splintered, and the leader stepped through.

Obi-Wan had his hand on his lightsaber hilt, but he looked quickly at his Master.

"Submit," Qui-Gon said quietly, and in moments, they were surrounded.

Chapter Nine

Qui-Gon allowed himself to be hustled down the stairs. Their captors said nothing, and he saw no need to volunteer any questions or comments. He was not sure if they knew that he and Obi-Wan were Jedi. He assumed that they were thought to be Workers.

In the cramped vestibule, thick strips of fabric were wound around their eyes to blindfold them. They were bound in energy manacles. Then they were pushed out the door. Qui-Gon felt himself being guided into a landspeeder. Obi-Wan was shoved next to him.

He concentrated, trying to gauge distance by calculating speed and time. He knew Obi-Wan was doing the same. The journey was short, and at the end they were roughly hauled out of the speeder and marched down a corridor. The speeder had been parked in an interior landing area. Listening for echoes, Qui-Gon estimated its size. For a landing area of this proportion, the building would have to be fairly large.

He heard a door accessed, and he was pushed inside a smaller area. He heard Obi-Wan stumble as he followed.

"This is where you belong, Jedi," a voice hissed.

So they knew their prisoners were Jedi. "Where are we and why are we being held? Who are you?" Qui-Gon asked.

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"None of your business' is the answer to your first question, and 'because you are enemies of the state' should answer your second. As for who we are, we are the saviors of Apsolon."

"You don't say," Qui-Gon remarked dryly. "Tell me, why are we your enemy?"

"We remember what the Jedi did six years before. Because of your interference, our true government was lost. It is up to us to recapture the glory we surrendered."

"New Apsolon did hold elections open to all – "

"We do not recognize New Apsolon, only Apsolon. And not every citizen deserves to vote."

"You are entitled to your opinion," Qui-Gon said. "Yet a government was legally elected by the laws of your world, so therefore – "

"Do you think I have time to argue with you?" The voice rose angrily.

The door slid shut.

"Well, that was an interesting conversation," Qui-Gon said. "We can see that the Absolutes are just as they appear. They are fanatics."

"Not good news for us," Obi-Wan said.

"I'm sure we'll have an interesting dialogue."

"Do you think they'll torture us?" Obi-Wan asked the question in a firm voice. He did not want Qui-Gon to think he was afraid. But when he remembered back to the different methods they had seen earlier that day, he couldn't say he felt comfortable with the notion.

"I have no idea what they are planning," Qui-Gon said.

They did not say any more. There was a good chance they were under surveillance. Qui-Gon moved closer to Obi-Wan and gently indicated his lightsaber with his fingers. It was to let his Padawan know that if torture lay ahead, they would not submit. Obi-Wan nodded.

They did not have long to wait. Less than an hour passed before they heard the door hiss open. They were pulled outside

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and then pushed along for a short distance. Another door was activated. Qui-Gon felt himself shoved inside.

He did not know what lay ahead, but he had his lightsaber. His hands were still bound, but he would find a way to resist.

He was forced into a chair. A bright light was in his face. He knew his Padawan was beside him.

"Here are the Jedi."

"We can see that, brother." The voice was low and powerful, with a wry twist to the cadence that he knew well. "You may leave us."

Yes, his hands were bound. Yes, he was blindfolded. He was a prisoner with no way out that he could tell. But Qui-Gon's heart sang. He had found Tahl.

Chapter Ten

He sensed other presences in the room. At least three, he thought.

"Why are you on Apsolon?" a male voice asked.

"A stopover," Qui-Gon replied. "We are traveling, and I was here six years ago. I had some curiosity as to how this world fared."

"Who sent for you?" another voice barked. "No one."

"Why were you present at a secret meeting of Workers?" a third shrill voice asked.

"We were not present at the meeting. We were observing it. Surely your own people could tell you that."

"Just answer the questions. Who is your contact in the Workers?"

"No one."

"You were seen with Irini. How did she contact you initially?"
She did not contact us. We went for a tour."

On and on the questions came. Qui-Gon answered them briefly. Tahl did not speak again. No doubt she had spoken first to let him know that she was in the room. Somehow she had infiltrated the inner circle of the Absolutes. She had done it in a short amount of time, and she had done it well. Qui-Gon admired her skill, but then, he always had. He felt almost liquid

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with relief that he had found her. A growing desperation had haunted him, and he had had to push thoughts of his vision aside.

When he released her, her body could not stay upright. She seemed to fold into his arms like drifting silk. Odd, because he had always counted on her strength. Now he felt the softness of her hair, her skin, the lightness of her bones. He felt how she could melt against him and become part of him. Tears sprang to his eyes at the way one of her hands curled weakly around his neck.

He wrenched his mind back to the present. He realized that the three men were arguing.

"Killing them would send a message," one said.

"Two messages. One to the Workers, one to Roan. It will show them we have power. But do we risk tipping our hand?"

"Perhaps if we threaten to kill them and then do so, it would be better."

The three continued to argue. Qui-Gon did not worry. The absence of Tahl's voice told him something important: She had done more than infiltrate the inner circle. She had gained power.

Again, Qui-Gon marveled at her fearlessness. Yet it only increased his own fears for her safety. His belief in his vision strengthened. Now he saw it as a vision that *could* happen, if she stayed on this dangerous course.

"T, you have said nothing," one of the men said at last.

"We will let them go," Tahl said. Immediately the others erupted in shouts. "

"Why?"

"Just let them go?"

"This makes no sense!"

But the three quieted so abruptly Qui-Gon knew that Tahl had made some kind of gesture. That was the kind of power she had.

"Again you all fail to factor in the one thing that we lack in our struggle," Tahl said. "Popular support. We cannot achieve power without it. I know you don't like to hear this. But the

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people of Apsolon are used to thinking they have a voice in government now. We can give them that illusion. That is not difficult. But we still need their support."

"What does this have to do with the Jedi?" someone asked sullenly.

"The Jedi are still respected on Apsolon. The people think they were responsible for keeping the peace during the transition. They see them as neutral -"

"They supported our dissolution! They were against us!"

"I am talking about appearances," Tahl snapped. "Always remember that appearances are much more important than reality. If we kill the Jedi and take responsibility for it, our hope of popular support will be gone. There will be time enough to kill our enemies."

"Well, why don't we just kill them and get them out of our way? We don't have to take responsibility for it."

There was a short silence. Qui-Gon could feel the tension in the room. He could only imagine the look of scorn that Tahl was directing at the speaker.

When she spoke, her voice was measured and slow, as if she were talking to a child with no notion of the way things worked. "First of all, killing Jedi is not cut and dried. You don't just kill them and expect no consequences. There would be an investigation. Certainly one from their order, and perhaps one from the Senate. This time, when we take power, we want the backing of the Senate. We have discussed this. We will be clever this time. The people will have the illusion that they have some control. Second, if you do make the decision to eliminate a powerful enemy, you do it so that you will gain something from it. If we discredit the Jedi and then kill them, we will gain. We cannot discredit them if we don't let them go."

"But they have heard everything we have been saying! We spoke freely because we thought they would be eliminated."

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"It does not matter," Tahl said. "We have control. We are more powerful than the Jedi on our own world. Stop being such cowards! Now leave me. I will send for R to release them."

Qui-Gon heard the three men file out. He heard a rustle of fabric being unwound next to him.

"Thank you," Obi-Wan said quietly.

Then Tahl approached him. But instead of unwrapping his blindfold, he felt her crouch in front of him.

"So, Qui-Gon," she said. "At last we are equal."

"Hardly. You were always my better." "Flattery will not give you back your sight." "I don't have to see you. It is enough to know you are safe."

Tahl sighed. He felt her warm breath stir his cheek. A moment later he felt the cool precision of her fingers as she unwrapped his blindfold.

It took a moment for his eyes to take her in. She was in disguise. Her distinctive green and gold striped eyes were now dark. Her hair was cropped short and the color of a pale moon, contrasting with her dark honey skin.

She kept her face toward him, as if reading him with her senses. He regarded her strange new eyes, and his disquiet at seeing her disguise faded as he saw his familiar Tahl behind their new color. He could not help it; he was happy.

She must have known it, for suddenly she reached out and touched his face with her fingertips. He felt her fingers against his lips.

"You are smiling."

"Yes."

"Don't."

She did not drop her hand, but kept it against his mouth. He saw that she unable to keep the small smile off her face and his own smile broadened beneath her hand.

"I can't seem to get rid of you," she said. "No," Qui-Gon replied. "You cannot."

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Obi-Wan watched the two friends. He felt that they had forgotten he was in the room. They even seemed to have forgotten the mission. He could not begin to know the tangle of feelings in this deep friendship. Tahl had been angry at Qui-Gon. Qui-Gon had kept himself aloof from her for awhile. These things he knew. But he did not know why these things had happened. He only knew it had something to do with Tahl's resentment of Qui-Gon's need to watch out for her since she had been blinded.

On this mission, he had often felt out of step with Qui-Gon. Over the years he had learned how his Master strategized. But now it was as if Qui-Gon was following some sort of internal logic he could not decipher. He did not know what was in his Master's mind. There had been many times when Qui-Gon's thoughts had been unclear to him, but never had it felt quite like this. There was a veil between them. Yet, looking at Tahl, he saw that she did not feel it. He tried not to feel jealous of that.

Tahl stood. "We can't talk here. Follow me. There is an exit this way."

She walked purposefully toward the door and accessed it. Obviously she knew this place well. She turned right down a short corridor. Obi-Wan could not tell what kind of a building they were in. It was industrial, and completely bare. Perhaps it had been a warehouse of some kind.

Tahl climbed a ramp to the next level. They saw no one. She walked toward a set of tall bay doors suitable for loading merchandise. Next to them was a smaller door for workers. She accessed this and they stepped out into the cool night.

"It's an abandoned warehouse," she told them. "The Absolutes bought it. They have a large treasury. The street is down at the end of the yard. I'll walk a little way with you, but I must return."

They slipped through the yard and exited out on a narrow street.

"Where are we?" Qui-Gon asked.

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"At the very edge of the Civilized Sector," Tahl explained. "If you follow this road, you will meet the State Boulevard where the government offices are."

Chapter Eleven

"Tell us your plan," Qui-Gon said. "Obviously, the situation is more volatile than we'd thought. We are here to help."

"I must admit that help would be welcome," Tahl said. "It wasn't hard for me to see that the twins are in danger. But I don't yet know from whom. I suspect the Absolutes, which is why I infiltrated them. But I've found nothing. Roan could be the secret leader behind them, but I've yet to discover if that is so."

"The twins told us they hadn't seen you," Obi-Wan said.

"They were trying to protect me," Tahl said. "We agreed I should go underground. They got me the false identity papers that said I was once a member of the Absolutes. It was a large, bureaucratic organization at one time. Many did not know the top-level operatives."

"So the twins *did* send for you," Qui-Gon said.

Tahl nodded. "When I arrived, I was surprised to find that they were not in hiding, as they'd said. They admitted embellishing their plea in order to ensure that I would come. They suspect that Roan was, in fact, responsible for the murder of their father. They are virtual prisoners in his home. I was ready to escort them off-planet into exile, but as we all discussed the situation, I was impressed with their maturity and courage, and also distressed by the state of things on New Apsolon. The

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twins are symbolic to the people. If they leave, the last traces of honorable government go with them. The twins changed their minds and insisted on staying. I decided that they needed to know exactly how much power the new Absolutes were gathering, and proposed that I go under cover. The twins were against the idea, but eventually agreed and helped me."

"How strong are the Absolutes?"

"Not as strong as they think," Tahl said. "Their numbers are small, and their organization is in a state of chaos. There is no real chain of command. It was easy for me to rise in the structure. The Absolutes are now engaged in low-level activity – gathering information, doing surveillance, and occasional harassment of the Worker Resistance. But what I don't like is that they have a vast treasury. They are amassing weapons."

"So they must have important backing from somewhere," Qui-Gon observed.

"Yes. But I don't know where. Yet. That's where you can help."

Obi-Wan glanced at his Master. He saw a struggle on Qui-Gon's face. He knew why. Qui-Gon did not want to oppose Tahl, but he did not agree with her. The reason was obvious.

"Tahl, the Jedi have not received an official request to help any party in this government,"

Qui-Gon said. "It is unclear as to whether Roan was involved in the late leader's death. It is uncertain whether the Absolutes will ever gain enough power to be a real threat. The planet is struggling with its new society, yes. But is that a reason for the Jedi to interfere?"

"But we *did* receive a request," Tahl argued. "From the twins. They are the daughters of the late ruler. Surely they have an official voice. And they are in danger."

"If that is so, then we should return to the original plan and get them off-planet," Qui-Gon said. "There is no reason to get involved in internal politics."

Tahl stopped walking. "What about our loyalty to those girls?"

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"This is not a question of loyalty – "

"On the contrary. They asked for my help, and I intend to give it. They want more than safety. They want to remain on their home planet. A planet that is stable and peaceful."

"The Jedi cannot promise them that," Qui-Gon said.

"You are so logical," Tahl said, shaking her head. "You block out your feelings, just as you did years ago. You look at this so dispassionately. You do not care enough."

Obi-Wan saw that Tahl's words had wounded Qui-Gon.

"I am a Jedi," he said. "So are you. There are ways to approach a mission, ways that have been shown over thousands of years to work."

"You were always the first one to break the rules."

"When the mission called for me to do so. This mission does not. And please..." Qui-Gon's voice roughened. "Do not accuse me of not caring. That is unfair."

They walked in silence for a moment. Obi-Wan longed to find the wise words to heal this division between the two friends, but he did not know how. Tahl had hurt Qui-Gon. Qui-Gon had hurt Tahl. He could feel that. He felt helpless to change it. The two friends now seemed to almost hate each other. He could feel their anger and disappointment in the crisp slap of their footsteps on the pavement.

At last Tahl spoke. "Let us reach a compromise," she said. "I need your help. Just give me one week. I will remain with the Absolutes under cover. You and Obi-Wan will investigate the murder of Ewane. I would ask you to begin with Roan's brother, Manex. Manex is extraordinarily wealthy – he used his political contacts to make a fortune before and after the bloodless revolution. There are many who suspect him of corruption. He could have been behind a plot to murder Ewane in order to bring his brother to power. Roan might have been involved in the plot as well. If we can find evidence that either Roan or his brother is guilty, we can begin to bring peace to New Apsolon."

"A week isn't much time," Qui-Gon said.

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"Not for most," Tahl said. "For you, it will be enough. If we fail to uncover any new evidence, we continue to offer safe passage to the twins. If they refuse, we will go back to Coruscant and only return here if an official request for Guardians of the Peace comes to us."

Qui-Gon thought for a moment. "I don't suppose there is any chance of persuading you to leave Absolute headquarters right now."

"None at all," Tahl said.

"Then I accept the compromise. And may the Force be with us."

His Master's words seemed heartfelt, no mere matter of formal blessing. His worry lay over them like a heavy fog. Obi-Wan could tell that Tahl was annoyed by it. Without another word, she headed back toward Absolute headquarters. Qui-Gon turned to watch her until she was swallowed up by the dark.

Chapter Twelve

Qui-Gon found a guesthouse where they could spend the night. His Padawan fell deeply asleep, but he lay awake. He could not decipher what hung on his heart. He could not fathom why he felt so angry at Tahl. He had lost his calm judgment. He had never felt less like a Jedi.

His vision had disturbed him, yes. But he had thought this gnawing feeling would settle once he had found Tahl and embarked on a path to help her. It had not. What was he overlooking?

He wrapped his blanket around his shoulders and turned on his side. There was a small window set high in the wall. Through it he could see one of New Apsolon's three moons. Tonight it was full and brilliant, with a slight pinkish cast. Qui-Gon meditated on its beauty while he tried to empty his mind. He tried to eliminate thoughts of tomorrow and what it would bring, tried not to think of Tahl in the midst of those fanatical followers.

He turned again.

"Qui-Gon? Is everything all right?"

From the sleep-couch in the opposite corner, Obi-Wan's sleepy voice interrupted his thoughts. He was disturbing his Padawan. And they needed rest.

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"Nothing. Go to sleep."

Qui-Gon willed his body to stillness and asked his mind to obey. His stubborn mind defied him, and sleep did not come. Instead, he stared at the moon.

If Obi-Wan noticed Qui-Gon's haggard looks the next morning, he did not mention it. His Padawan silently took the responsibility for their morning meal, disappearing and bringing back tea, bread, and fruit.

Qui-Gon was as grateful for Obi-Wan's silence as his consideration. They dressed, shouldered their packs, and set out for the address that Tahl had given them.

Manex, the brother of Roan, lived near the residence of the Supreme Governor. His home was vastly larger, built not of the gray stone they had come to know but of dazzling white and black stones arranged in patterns. The home was more like a palace, trumpeting its size and sheer audacity between its somber, stately neighbors.

"He certainly doesn't mind advertising his wealth," Qui-Gon remarked as he activated the chiming device to announce their entrance.

A protocol droid with a highly buffed, black metallic body answered the door. Qui-Gon announced their names and that they were Jedi. He saw no need for concealment now. Both the Absolutes and the Workers knew that Jedi were on New Apsolon. Tahl felt certain that her identity was secure. If they worked fast, they would not endanger her position.

Manex received them in a small room with walls, floor, and a ceiling of black stone. Thick green carpets were scattered on the gleaming floor, and the room was filled with overstuffed benches and seating areas, all upholstered in different shades of vivid green. Large pillows the color of new grass were thrown about on the floor. Thick emerald curtains hid the windows.

A tall, plump man was lying on one of those pillows, propped up on a long, low sleep-couch. He jumped up when they entered

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the room. His black, curly hair was cut short and covered his head like a cap. His eyes were blue and friendly.

"Welcome, Jedi. How nice of you to call. I'm delighted to see you."

Qui-Gon bowed. He felt a bit overwhelmed by the room and the effusive greeting. He had not expected it. He'd imagined Manex to be a cool, ruthless businessman.

"I was just doing my morning meditation. I understand you do the same." Manex's eyes were merry. "I meditate on all the beautiful things I must have. No doubt my process is different from yours."

"Yes," Qui-Gon said.

Manex noted Obi-Wan's fascination with the room. "Green is my favorite color. I can afford to indulge all my pleasures. Aren't I lucky? Sit, sit!"

Qui-Gon took a seat on the companion sleep-couch across from the one where Manex now lolled. He sank down into the plush upholstery. Obi-Wan sat next to him, trying to keep his spine straight. It was difficult on such a luxurious piece of furniture.

Manex gestured to a gold tray with sweets arrayed on it. "I have the best pastry chef on New Apsolon. Try one." He popped a fruit tart in his mouth.

Qui-Gon saw Obi-Wan eye the beautiful sweets hungrily, but his Padawan did not take one.

"What can I do for you?" Manex asked, dusting crumbs off his gold robe.

Qui-Gon had thought about how best to proceed. He wasn't sure what they could learn by simply talking to Manex. After all, he would hardly admit to being corrupt. Yet beings often gave away clues to their true nature without knowing it. In the end, Qui-Gon had decided his route would be honesty.

"I was part of the original Jedi team sent here to monitor the elections six years ago," Qui-Gon said. "I am not here now on an

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official mission, but I was curious to see how New Apsolon had fared. I must say what I have seen is cause for disquiet."

Manex sat up, as if speaking of serious things caused his spine to straighten. "Ewane's murder was a tragedy. New Apsolon was thriving. There was no need for unrest. We were just getting the economy to be as good as it was before all the troubles. Worker and Civilized alike stood to have their lives improved as the wealth began to pour in again. The galaxy lost faith in our products and is just now beginning to regain it. We lost our prosperity through conflict once. It is a great shame that we risk it again."

"Wealth is important to you," Qui-Gon said neutrally.

"Yes." Manex met his gaze serenely. "I enjoy having it. There are those who say I amassed my wealth through corruption and contacts. I assume that is what you are referring to."

Qui-Gon was impressed. He had a glimpse of the businessman now. Manex would speak plainly, or at least appear to.

"Contacts, yes. Why shouldn't I? My brother was highly placed in government. I took advantage of those trying to get on his good side. But that is different from corruption. I saw ways to improve business here. As a Civilized, I was allowed to trade off-planet. Workers were not. The law was unfair, but I would have been a fool not to profit by it. I was able to open up vast trade markets in the galaxy for the goods of New Apsolon. I had a network of info-tech contracts. So I was happy to see a Worker elected and the government stabilized."

"You did not join your brother in calling for unity at the time," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"My brother is the hero. I am the businessman."

Qui-Gon picked up a pastry. He did not want it. He took it because it had been offered, and Manex was obviously proud of what he had. Qui-Gon wanted to show respect and keep this meeting cordial. He popped the small, delicate sweet into his

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mouth. Instantly it melted into a silken explosion of taste – tart, sweet, complex.

Manex smiled, for Qui-Gon could not keep the surprise off his face. "I did not exaggerate. The best."

"Yes."

"I only call what I have the best if it is. I do not fool myself about anything. Take my brother." Manex crashed back against the soft pillows. "He is noble. Courageous. Dedicated to the common good. All the things I am not. I should despise him, for I'm told brothers become jealous when one is vastly superior to the other. Yet I don't despise Roan. I'm glad beings like him are on this world. They make it possible for me to live well."

"Since your brother is now Supreme Governor, you stand to profit even more," Qui-Gon pointed out. "You would not gain anything by despising him."

"I could despise him and still exploit him," Manex shot back. "Surely you have seen enough of the galaxy to know that, Jedi."

"Yes," Qui-Gon admitted.

"You are suggesting that I am behind the murder of Ewane," Manex said shrewdly. "I know others believe this. But why should I endanger my fortune in such a way?" Manex shook his head. "I like my comfort too much to risk it."

"Besides, it would be wrong," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"That too."

"Do you think your brother had anything to do with Ewane's murder?" Qui-Gon asked. "There are those who believe that, too."

"Roan?" Manex shook his head. "He loved Ewane like a brother. Look how he took in those girls."

"That could be to get sympathy on his side," Obi-Wan said.

Manex did not seem disturbed by this suggestion. He leaned forward. "You must understand something. Duty is everything to my brother. He feels responsible for Alani and Eritha."

Jude Watson

"There are those who say the twins are in danger, living in the house of one who is a suspect in their father's killing," Obi-Wan said.

"There are those on New Apsolon who will say anything right now to get what they want," Manex said evenly. "Those girls are free to go, and yet they stay. They know Roan better than they knew their own father. All this grief they are displaying – who is it for? They never knew their father. Ewane was in prison for all the years of their childhood. Then he was Supreme Governor and had his hands full. He never really knew his daughters."

"One cannot fault a child's grief for a father, no matter how distant the relationship," Qui-Gon said.

"Of course not. I am sure the twins are sincere." Manex sat up and pushed the plate of pastries toward them. "Such somber talk for such a beautiful morning. Please, eat. I'll send for some tea."

Qui-Gon stood. "We must be going. Thank you for your hospitality."

"I am delighted to receive the Jedi. You may return anytime." Manex stood to bid them good-bye.

The same protocol droid led them to the door. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan paused on the steps. Qui-Gon took a deep breath of morning. It was encouraging to feel the cool air and sunshine, but he felt no closer to helping Tahl.

"What do you think?" he asked Obi-Wan as they returned to the street.

"I found him unpleasant," Obi-Wan said. "He could have the cunning to engineer an overthrow of the government. But I can't see him having the energy to do so. He would have to get off his sleep-couch."

"You are allowing dislike to color your perceptions, Padawan," Qui-Gon said disapprovingly. "Remember it takes energy to amass wealth. Manex had it easier than most, but he did build an impressive financial empire."

"Which he uses for his own pleasure," Obi-Wan said disgustedly.

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"I have seen men and women of vast wealth who did not enjoy their own comforts," Qui-Gon remarked. "At least Manex enjoys what he has built. His choices are not our choices. Do not let his enjoyment of pleasure blind you to his merits."

"You see merits there?" Obi-Wan asked incredulously. "I see corruption."

"I see a man who lives the way he wants to live and makes no apologies. The question is, how desperate is he to maintain his life of wealth and comfort?" Qui-Gon wondered. "If Manex seems weak, I suspect he is not. Despite his denials, he could secretly hate his brother. But we still should not discount his perspective, Padawan."

Qui-Gon reached inside the pocket of his robe. "And he reminded me of something important." "A clue?"

He handed Obi-Wan a pastry he had plucked from Manex's tray on the way out. "Even in the middle of a mission, don't neglect to taste the pastries."

Chapter Thirteen

"Let's head to Roan's," Qui-Gon suggested next. "It's time we met the Supreme Governor."

The official residence was close by. Qui-Gon thought over the conversation with Manex. He wished he had learned more. He had hoped to take some information to Tahl. Instead, he had only vague feelings.

"Qui-Gon," Obi-Wan said softly, "look ahead. Ten meters to the right, near that monument."

Qui-Gon glanced over. His Padawan's keen gaze had picked out a small tracking droid. It hovered in the grassy square across from the residence of the Supreme Governor. He had not noted it. He sternly told himself to focus on each moment. He could not let his worry distract him this way.

"Do you think it's looking for us?" Obi-Wan asked.

"No. It is watching the residence. It's not a probe droid. It could be used just for security." Qui-Gon searched the area carefully, dividing it into quadrants and examining every meter. "There. By the trees in front. Another."

"Roan has stepped up his surveillance."

"Or someone has stepped up surveillance on Roan. I don't like what we're seeing. I'm feeling a disturbance in the Force. Come, Padawan."

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Qui-Gon strode toward the residence. When they stepped up to the door and pressed the security button, a guard did not materialize onscreen. The blank screen merely shone blue.

Qui-Gon's foreboding changed to alarm. He pushed against the door, but it would not open.

"We could try the gardens," Obi-Wan suggested.

A high wall separated the front of the residence from the gardens behind. The top was ringed with electro-wire. It was not a challenge for the Jedi. Summoning the Force, the two leaped high and cleared the wall easily. They landed softly on the grass.

They ran alongside the great mansion toward the back, where the gardens were. As they ran Qui-Gon searched for access to the house but there were no windows on this side. Perhaps the residence was built with exits only in the front and back. It made it easier to defend.

They burst into the gardens. At first Qui-Gon could only pick out a riot of color from the masses of flowering bushes surrounding them. Paths ran through the bushes, narrow and twisting. It was impossible to get a view of any kind.

"See if you can glimpse the back wall," Qui-Gon directed Obi-Wan. "Look for signs of entry."

Qui-Gon scanned the back of the house. Everything looked quiet and serene. Not a curtain stirred. At first glance, there was no sign of distress or danger. Then Qui-Gon noticed that a door was slightly ajar.

"Qui-Gon!"

Qui-Gon turned and raced down the path. He caught up to Obi-Wan as his Padawan raced through the twisting paths. "I saw something ahead – movement. And I think.."

They turned a corner. Ahead they could see a team of intruders hauling something over the wall. It was about the size of a person, black and shiny. There was a slit in the top.

Qui-Gon recognized the sensory deprivation container from the Museum of the Absolute. But why were the intruders dragging it over the wall?

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Then he saw, through the slit at the top, a strand of golden hair waving.

"They have the twins," he said.

They activated their lightsabers and charged.

The intruders were masked and dressed in dark clothing. They saw the Jedi approaching. One of them reached for a transmitter.

"Overhead, Obi-Wan!" Qui-Gon shouted.

Probe droids suddenly buzzed above them. Blaster fire rained down. Lightsabers swinging, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan deflected fire while they raced to the wall.

Other probe droids approached, high enough to avoid retaliation and peppering the Jedi with fire. The intruders had the advantage. They dropped over the wall and disappeared.

It would be difficult to leap over the wall and deflect fire at the same time. Qui-Gon knew that. He had no choice.

He accessed the Force and leaped. Beside him, he saw Obi-Wan do the same. They sailed over the wall, high above. In those quick seconds, Qui-Gon had a chance to swipe two probe droids. Obi-Wan neatly cleaved one in half. The three droids fell sizzling to the ground.

They landed on the other side of the wall. A long expanse of grass stretched before them. Parked on it were large swoops.

The intruders had already loaded the two containers onto swoops. As the Jedi raced forward, they took off.

A concealed door in the wall opened and security forces rushed through. Qui-Gon recognized Balog, the head of security.

"What's going on?" he barked angrily. "What are you doing here?"

"I think the twins have been taken on those swoops," Qui-Gon said, pointing at what was now a fleet of dots in the sky.

Balog spoke quickly into his comlink, giving the coordinates of his position and asking for air support.

"Did you see them?" he asked.

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"We saw two sensory deprivation containers, the same design that we saw at the museum. I saw one of the girls' hair. That's all."

Balog turned to the guards. "Check the house again. And check the grounds." He then turned back to Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan. "I thought you were tourists. What were you doing here?"

"We are Jedi," Qui-Gon answered. "We are not here on an official mission. I knew the girls six years ago. We came to see them."

Balog gave them the hard stare of a security officer who was used to lies. Something must have convinced him, because he sighed. "This happened on my watch. I thought security was perfect. Somehow they got through the house security and immobilized the guards. They tripped the alarms, but it took too long for us to get here."

"Do you have suspects?" Obi-Wan asked.

"Obviously, it could be the Absolutes," Balog said. "Those devices were supposed to be destroyed, but of course we know that some must have been smuggled out. Anyone could have bought them on the black market. In other words, no, I don't know who took the twins." He gazed at the sky. "I just hope that whoever took them is planning to ransom them. I hope this is a kidnapping, not..."

He did not complete the sentence. "The use of the containers points to that," Qui-Gon said. "If the intruders were going to kill the twins, they would have done so here."

Balog ran a hand over his forehead. "I must tell Roan personally. He will be devastated."

He walked off, too distracted to say a farewell.

Qui-Gon stared after him. "Unless Roan already knows," he said.

Chapter Fourteen

They met Tahl in a prearranged location deep in the Worker Sector. It was a small park that commemorated an early protestor of Apsolon's system. A single white glass column stood in the middle of the small green. They kept their hoods drawn over their faces as they circled the park, around and around. Once she heard the news of the twins, it had taken three turns for Tahl to speak.

"I do not think it was the Absolutes," she said finally. "I believe I would know it. There were extreme factions of the group, but they are under the control of the central committee now. At least I think so. It's a possibility, but I'm more inclined to think that Irini and the Workers kidnapped the twins. They feel strongly that Roan murdered Ewane. Perhaps they could even justify the kidnapping as keeping the twins away from danger."

"You should join us in tracking the kidnappers," Qui-Gon said. "If you believe the Absolutes are not involved, it is a waste of time for you to remain there."

"I said I *thought* they weren't involved," Tahl corrected. "There is always the possibility that rogue members have done this. I need to stay in place and investigate. It would be natural for the

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Absolutes to try to find out who did it. I can use their surveillance resources."

Obi-Wan noted that his Master seemed to be restraining his objection. He did not understand why. Tahl was right. She should remain undercover, at least until they knew who had taken the twins.

"Do you think Roan could be involved?" he asked Tahl.

"I don't know," Tahl said. "Of course we need to entertain the possibility."

"We were on our way to speak to him when we interrupted the kidnapping," Qui-Gon said.

"Maybe we should try to speak to him now," Obi-Wan suggested.

"It might be hard," Tahl pointed out. "He will be on a full-scale alert. He won't have time for us."

Just then Qui-Gon's comlink signaled. When he answered it, it was Balog. Qui-Gon listened intently for a few moments, then clicked off the communication.

"It will be easier than we thought," Qui-Gon said. "Roan has asked to see us."

Roan met the Jedi in his office at the massive Institute of Government Service building. Despite the grandeur of the building, his office was sparsely furnished, with chairs lined up against a wall, a long table that served as a desk, and a bare floor of gray stone. The window looked down on the streets. On their own, Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan had seen the signs of protest beginning. As the word spread of the twins' fate, people were spilling out into the streets.

The Workers had organized quickly. Across the street in the square they had formed a solid cube of beings in the same shape as the many monuments in the city. More continued to arrive. The front line carried a banner::

ARREST ROAN NOW

Jude Watson

Roan turned from the window as they entered. He was, in midlife, an imposing figure, with one silver streak on one side of his dark hair. He bowed in greeting.

"Welcome. If I had known you were here before this, I would have called for this meeting earlier."

"We are not here officially, so did not want to trouble you," Qui-Gon said.

"Consider yourselves official," Roan said grimly. His dark eyes looked haunted. "We need help to find the girls. I know that you want to find them, too. I am also aware that there are those who believe that I was behind the murder of their father and now their abduction. I have summoned you here to tell you this is not so."

"Why do you think the rumor began?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Because since Ewane's murder the structure of the government has been in a precarious state. There are those who are calling for new elections. My enemies have encouraged the rumor that I killed Ewane." Roan paced in front of the window. It was coated so that he could see out, Qui-Gon noted, but the people massing below could not see him.

He turned and faced the Jedi. He spread his hands. "I do not know what to do. My planet has struggled for fairness and achieved freedom for all its people. Now it is in danger of losing that stability. I see visions of ruin whenever I close my eyes. Yet I know I can prevent this ruin. I just don't know how. Events seem to unfold before me and I am powerless over them."

Qui-Gon felt a rush of sympathy for Roan. The man truly looked haunted. And Qui-Gon himself knew what it was like to be plagued by visions. He knew what it felt like to have events rush by as if he'd once seen them unfold in a dream and had only now remembered it.

"What would you like us to do?" Qui-Gon asked.

But just then Roan's internal communication unit signaled. With an impatient gesture, he went to answer it.

"I left instructions that I was not to be disturbed – "

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"Yes, Governor. But we have received an external communication. They ask for you only. They say they are the kidnappers."

Roan looked at the Jedi. "I would like you to hear this." He spoke into the comm unit. "Please put them through."

The voice that came through the comm unit was obviously electronically manipulated. It had an eerie, echoing quality, half machine, half living being.

"Good afternoon. Today the descendants of Ewane were taken in a raid. We are holding them. We are willing to release them upon your meeting certain conditions."

"Are they all right?" Roan asked. "Let me speak to them."

"They are safe and were not harmed. Do not speak. Listen."

"I will pay for their release – "

"Do not speak! We do not want money. We want you to resign your position as Supreme Governor. You will say you are bowing to the will of the people. You will call for new elections. You will never reveal that you have resigned in order to free the twins."

Roan met Qui-Gon's eyes. Qui-Gon saw that he would agree. He had no choice.

"Oh, yes. If you say you will do this, and you go back on your word, both you and the twins will be killed. Make no mistake that we are capable of getting to you anywhere. Even with Jedi protection."

"All right," Roan said, leaning toward the comm unit. "I agree to your terms. But I must see the twins and escort them to safety. I don't want them frightened again."

"That would be acceptable. We will contact you with details."

"When?" Roan asked urgently, but the communication was cut off.

Roan sat down heavily. "They are alive, at least. If we can believe them."

"You must not go to this meeting alone," Qui-Gon said. "When they contact you again, you must ask for a Jedi escort."

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You must ensure that both you and the twins come back from this meeting alive."

Roan nodded. "I will. I know you will protect them. I am all they have. I must do as the abductors ask. But I will be grateful for your assistance. Our first concern is the lives of those girls."

Chapter Fifteen

Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan left Roan, who promised he would call the Jedi as soon as the kidnappers contacted him again. They had only gone a few steps from the government building when Qui-Gon's comlink signaled.

"Qui-Gon, I need you."

It was Tahl. Qui-Gon felt his worry collect into one burning mass in his chest. She sounded breathless, in trouble. Not to mention that she was asking for his help.

"Tell me."

"I don't know how, but they discovered that I am a Jedi. They are afraid of how much I know. I escaped from the headquarters, but they've sent probe droids after me. Qui-Gon, I... I can't see the droids – "

"Do you know your location?"

"I crossed to the Worker Sector. I went four blocks south, three blocks east. I am concealed in a memorial, you know the ones with the standing columns?"

"Yes." Qui-Gon was already walking rapidly toward the Worker Sector.

"I'm hiding between the glass columns, but it won't take long before the probe droids locate me. There are many beings on the streets, so that will confuse them for a time, but – "

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"We are on our way."

Qui-Gon quickly explained the situation to Obi-Wan, and they began to run. Tahl could not sense the droids through the Force, and this made her predicament all the more dire. He remembered precisely the location of the Absolute headquarters.

Was this it, was this the meaning of his vision? Would he find Tahl curled up between the columns? Would the probe droids have found her?

Her eyes were black and dull, but they sparked to life when she saw him...

He had seen Tahl's eyes in the vision, and they were dark, the color of the lenses she had donned to conceal their distinctive color. Qui-Gon remembered this detail like a blow. Did that mean the rest of the vision would come true?

"Qui-Gon, we're here." Obi-Wan spoke quietly by his side, his breath roughened by the hard run. "We should be cautious now. The probe droids might be searching for us, too."

It was a good point. He should have thought of it. He slowed his pace to a walk so that they were not obvious among the passersby. Then they gradually increased their speed, mingling with the crowd. Because of the unrest concerning the twins' disappearance, the streets were crowded.

Qui-Gon counted off the blocks, struggling not to run. Attuned to the air above, he did not see any probe droids. He did not know whether to be reassured or worried by this.

At last they reached the corner where the monument to the dead Workers stood. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan hurried toward the glowing columns. They searched through the rows, at last finding Tahl near the back, at a place where she was hidden but still had room to escape the cube and run.

She turned her face up at the sound of their footsteps. Her eyes were dark, but not dulled with pain. She was fine. Her wry smile tore at his heart. "Thanks for coming."

Qui-Gon crouched down and signaled to Obi-Wan to do the same. "There are many on the streets. It will be hard for the

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probe droids to track you. I think the safest place for us now would be with Roan. Even if he is behind the kidnapping, he must maintain the illusion that he is not. Since your cover is blown, it doesn't matter who knows that you are Jedi."

"True," Tahl said. "Let's go."

Obi-Wan scanned the sky. "Surveillance will be heaviest around here. Once we get into the Civilized Sector, the probe droids might give up."

"Stay between us, and stay close," Qui-Gon told her.

They made their way cautiously out from the glowing glass columns, then into the flow of pedestrians. Gradually it became clear that the passersby had a destination.

"They are heading somewhere," Qui-Gon murmured.

"Probably a demonstration," Tahl guessed.

The demonstration turned out to be only a few blocks ahead. The crowd all turned toward the small park where Workers were massing. Qui-Gon, Obi-Wan, and Tahl were left alone.

"We could hide in the crowd," Qui-Gon said in a low tone.

"But we would just have to leave it later," Obi-Wan said.

"Maybe the probe droids will give up."

"No," Tahl said. "The Absolutes never give up."

"I say we go now," Qui-Gon said. "It's not far to the Civilized Sector and Roan. The kidnappers could be contacting him at anytime. He has agreed to a Jedi presence."

"I agree," Tahl said, and Obi-Wan nodded.

Quickly they turned away from the demonstration and headed toward the Civilized Sector. They had gone a short distance when Qui-Gon felt a presence.

"I feel it," Tahl said.

"Something is nearby," Obi-Wan agreed.

The probe droid zoomed into view, flying lower to get a fix on the three. Qui-Gon leaped up without warning, slashing out with his activated lightsaber. The probe droid crashed to the ground, smoking.

"There will be more now," Tahl muttered.

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They quickened their pace. Soon three probe droids approached. Blaster fire erupted around them. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan kept close to Tahl, moving forward while deflecting the fire.

Qui-Gon was worried. If more probe droids arrived, he and Obi-Wan would not be able to deflect that much firepower. Already their pace had to slow to protect Tahl and ensure her safety.

"I can get above them on that ledge," Obi-Wan said. "Can you cover Tahl while I do?"

"Yes," Qui-Gon said. It was their only hope. He was glad his Padawan's sharp eyes had seen the building ahead.

Obi-Wan shot out his liquid cable launcher and within seconds had gained the ledge high above. Even as the launcher propelled him through the air, he slashed at a probe droid that was zeroing in on Tahl. He cleaved it in two and it sputtered as it spiraled below to the ground.

One of the two remaining droids zoomed up to focus on Obi-Wan while the other continued to fire at Tahl. Obi-Wan hung from his launcher and pushed off against the building with his feet. He swung out toward the droid and attacked, missing it by centimeters. He used his feet to kick off the building again, propelling himself higher and farther. Unused to this unorthodox action from a being it was tailing, the probe droid circled, beeping. Obi-Wan slashed at it, destroying some of its circuits. It began to act erratically, circling and diving. On his next swing, Obi-Wan cut it apart.

Qui-Gon saw Obi-Wan demolish the droid, but he was busy with the remaining one. "There are some durasteel garbage bins ahead," he told Tahl. "I'm going to push you behind them and go after the droid."

In a few steps, he pushed Tahl down behind the bins, then leaped up on top of them. Obi-Wan saw his action and quickly ran closer on the ledge, still attached to his cable launcher. As Qui-Gon leaped high, Obi-Wan released the cable to fly down.

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They caught the probe droid between them and each struck a strong blow. Tumbling, on fire, the probe droid smashed into the pavement below.

Obi-Wan leaped lightly to the ground as Qui-Gon landed and reached for Tahl. The three now began to run. They did not tire and did not stop until they passed into the Civilized Sector, where the population now thronged the streets. They would be safe among them.

"I can honestly say I couldn't have done it without you," Tahl said, panting.

They pushed on to the Institute of Government Service. They hurried inside toward Roan's office. They burst in, but it was empty. His assistant came running in after them.

"You can't – oh, please excuse me. I didn't realize you were the Jedi."

"Where is Roan?" Qui-Gon asked.

"He has gone to a meeting."

"What meeting?"

The assistant hesitated.

"We are in Roan's confidence, as you know," Qui-Gon said.

"Has he gone to meet the kidnappers?"

The assistant nodded.

Qui-Gon strode to the window, exhaling his irritation against the glass. This was unfortunate.

He did not trust the kidnappers. Roan could have been the real target all along.

Tahl questioned the assistant sharply, but it was clear he did not know where Roan had gone or any details of the meeting.

"What can we do?" Obi-Wan asked.

Tahl and Qui-Gon spoke together. "Wait."

They stayed for hours in Roan's office. At last Balog came to them.

"I have arranged accommodations in the Governor's residence," he told them. "You will be more comfortable there,

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and after all, that is where Roan will go when he returns with the twins." He hesitated. "I wish he had confided in me, too. I will wait with you."

Qui-Gon nodded. "Thank you."

Balog escorted them the short distance to the residence. Dusk had fallen, and the crowds protesting in the square had dwindled.

"Apparently the lure of the evening meal has caused some to lose their dedication," Balog observed.

As they neared the residence, Qui-Gon noticed a large package on the walkway leading up to the house. It was outside the security field.

"Balog, there is something – "

"I see it." Balog spoke quickly into his com-link, calling for security, even as he ran alongside Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan.

There was a deep unease in Qui-Gon that only grew as he ran. As he drew closer, what he feared took shape before him.

It was not a package. It was Roan, wrapped in dark fabric and tied with wire.

Qui-Gon knelt by his side. Roan's sightless eyes stared up at the gathering night. The Supreme Governor was dead.

Chapter Sixteen

Gently, Qui-Gon placed his hand over Roan's eyes, closing them. Balog and Obi-Wan came forward. Balog sank to his knees.

"You can rest now, my friend," he murmured brokenly.

Carefully, Balog, Qui-Gon, and Obi-Wan lifted the body. They carried Roan inside his home for the last time. Tears now streamed down Balog's cheeks, but his face was composed and he said nothing.

"I must see to the arrangements," he said as they laid Roan in the reception room. "We must try to conceal this for as long as we can. We must find the twins first. I think it best that we not tell anyone just yet."

"This will be hard to conceal," Qui-Gon said. "Whoever killed Roan will want it known."

Qui-Gon was right. In a short time the darkness outside was lit with glow rods and candles. Obi-Wan had thought there were many in the streets that afternoon. Now it seemed that the entire population of New Apsolon was outside, pouring out their grief or their rage.

Balog stared outside at the demonstrations. "I must get a message to Manex. He should not find out this way."

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The Jedi sat in an inner room. Obi-Wan was unsure of their next step. He knew they would not leave until the twins were found. Perhaps they would escort them off-planet since the situation was so volatile. He watched Qui-Gon and Tahl, who sat opposite each other but did not speak.

A short time later they heard a disturbance in the hall. Obi-Wan followed Qui-Gon and Tahl out of the room.

It was Manex. His voice was high with his distress. "I was hosting a dinner. They brought me the news." He looked slightly foolish in an opulent green velvet robe and a red tasseled cap that Obi-Wan thought inappropriate under the circumstances.

Balog spoke to him in a low tone. "We believe the cause of death was a paralyzing agent that attacked his heart and lungs. We do not know if the attempt was to kill or stun, but it was too late to revive him."

Manex nodded sadly and looked at the Jedi. "I saw this end for my brother," he said. "I think he did as well. Yet he went forward."

"He always went forward," Balog said.

Manex put his hand on Balog's shoulder. "Thank you for all you have done. Now I will sit with my brother until morning."

"I will send in refreshment for you," Balog said.

"Send nothing." Manex walked softly to the door where Roan lay, opened it, and disappeared inside.

The Jedi returned to the small room. "Do you think he was genuine?" Obi-Wan asked Qui-Gon. "He hardly looked the part of a grieving brother."

"Yes," Qui-Gon said. "But there is another perspective. You could say that he did not take the time to change but rushed here when he heard. His attire could be confirmation of his grief."

"Is that what you think?" Obi-Wan asked.

"I don't know. But I need to hold the two perspectives so my vision will be clear."

Obi-Wan nodded. They sat again. The hours passed. The lights were powered down until they gave off a soft glow. Obi-

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Wan felt himself beginning to nod off, but he did not want to suggest sleep until Qui-Gon did. It was unusual for Qui-Gon not to take notice of his fatigue.

Suddenly, Qui-Gon stood, his hand on his lightsaber hilt. "Someone is outside," he murmured.

Obi-Wan stood, ready for action, his sleepiness gone instantly.

"Wait here," Qui-Gon told Tahl. "Obi-Wan and I will investigate."

But Tahl followed them into the hallway just as the front door opened. Security officers ran into the hall, alerted by a hidden alarm. But instead of intruders, Eritha and Alani spilled in. The twins looked pale, their clothing wrinkled and stained, but they were not hurt.

"Where is Roan?" Alani cried. "Take us to him!"

Eritha came forward to Tahl. "You're here. I am so glad to see you. What has happened? We heard on the streets that Roan is dead. It can't be true. Is it?"

Balog took a few steps toward them. "I'm afraid it is true. He lies inside."

Alani turned to Eritha. She put her arms around her sister. "We must go to him."

"He did not kill our father," Eritha said. "He put himself in danger for us. Alani, we are the guilty ones!"

"He would not be dead if he hadn't tried to rescue us," Alani said, her voice rising.

"No." Tahl walked toward them. "You are guilty of nothing. Roan made his own choice."

"Did you escape or did they let you go?" Balog asked them.

"They let us go. We never saw their faces." Alani wiped tears from her face.

"We believe it's best if you come with us to Coruscant in the morning," Tahl said gently.

Alani looked at her sister. "Yes, I think it is best."

"I do want to leave this place," Eritha whispered. "I never thought I would say that, but it is true."

Jude Watson

"We need to see Roan now," Alani said.

Eritha and Alani, their arms around each other, passed into the room where Roan lay. The door closed behind them.

Balog turned to the Jedi. "I was just coming to meet with you. All night we have worked to arrange a peace meeting. We do not know who was behind this, but we cannot wait to find out while unrest fills the streets. The Workers and the Civilized have agreed to meet. Also a representative from the Absolutes has agreed, as long as we give him safe conduct back to where he came from and do not arrest him. We have agreed to that condition because we must. I will also be at the meeting. As a Worker who is part of the current government, I am needed for balance. Irini will represent the Workers."

"This is good news," Qui-Gon said. "Only when you begin to talk can you begin to resolve this situation. The government must be stabilized."

"There is only one condition," Balog said. "A Jedi representative must be present. Each of the parties has asked for this – except for the Absolutes. However the representative has agreed reluctantly. The meeting is at dawn." Balog checked his chrono. "An hour away."

"I will go with you," Qui-Gon said.

"No," Tahl said. "I will go." She turned to Qui-Gon. "It has to be me, Qui-Gon. I infiltrated the Absolute organization. I know things the others do not. If the representative of the Absolutes tries to lie about the organization, I am the only one who will know."

"That is true," Balog said. "The Workers and the Civilized trust the Absolutes even less than each other."

"Take the twins to Coruscant in the morning," Tahl said. "I will join you there after this meeting."

Obi-Wan kept his eyes on his Master. Qui-Gon had gone pale. It was clear he was not happy with this turn of events. He wanted to be the one to go to the meeting. But there was something more there, some powerful emotion Obi-Wan did not

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understand. There appeared to be some sort of titanic struggle going on inside Qui-Gon.

Tahl picked up on it as well. She frowned and seemed about to speak.

Then, to Obi-Wan's surprise, he saw something flicker in Qui-Gon's eyes. It was almost as though Qui-Gon was amused by something, something private. It was gone so quickly that Obi-Wan was sure he was mistaken.

His Master shook his head as if to clear it. He appeared both shaken and determined at the same time.

Qui-Gon turned to Balog. "Will you excuse us? I need to speak with Tahl alone."

"Of course." Balog bowed and retreated.

Obi-Wan started off with Qui-Gon and Tahl toward the private room. But Qui-Gon turned.

"Please wait here, Padawan," he said kindly.

Surprised, Obi-Wan could only nod. He watched as his Master followed Tahl into the room and closed the door firmly behind them.

Chapter Seventeen

"Dear friend," Tahl said, "there have been too many arguments between us. Do not let another one arise."

"I did not ask for privacy to argue with you," Qui-Gon said.

He knew that outside that door, life went on. People were grieving. Others plotted the overthrow of a government. The planet of New Apsolon continued to revolve in its orbit. Its moons were slowly dropping in the sky.

Yet it all meant nothing to him, not at this moment. At last he had come to see the truth. He had touched it and marveled at it and laughed at himself for not seeing it earlier. He had done all this in the space of a moment.

Oddly enough, the key to his revelation had been simple – the image of the pastry he had handed to Obi-Wan just yesterday. He had remembered the taste of it, the sweetness filling his mouth. That had been the lesson he had been searching for, the one he had given to his Padawan without much thought. In the midst of a complicated life of danger and service, he must sometimes remember to reach for the fruit.

"I wish to tell you something," he said. "Well, two things. The first is that I agree that you should be the one to go to the meeting. But we will not take the twins and go, not until you

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return. I cannot leave New Apsolon without you. I have a deep conviction that if I do, I will not see you again."

She started to pass off his remark, but stopped herself. "You feel this strongly?"

"I do. I felt foreboding back at the Temple. I was in a fever to see you again. Once we were together here, despite the fact that so much was unsettled, I did not care because I knew you were safe as long as we were together."

She nodded slowly. "But Qui-Gon, I am not your Padawan. We cannot be together always."

"Ah," Qui-Gon said. "This brings me to the second thing I must say."

Yet now that the moment had come, he stopped. Tahl waited. She would not prompt him. She would give him time. She did not always do that – she was the one to prod him, ask him the very questions he did not want to ask himself. Yet she knew him so well that she always knew when to give him time.

His heart filled, and she seemed to know it. Her face softened. Still, she did not speak.

"I have come to know something," he said. "I cannot let you go, I cannot let another minute pass, without telling you this. I did not come to New Apsolon only because you are my friend. I did not remain because you are a fellow Jedi. I have come to see that you are not just a friend and a fellow Jedi, Tahl. You are necessary to my life. You are necessary to me. You are my heart."

He saw her chest rise and fall. Color rose in her face. "You are not speaking of friendship," she said.

"I am speaking of something deeper. I am speaking of everything a being can give another. This is what I offer you. I offer myself."

He could not have spoken plainer. Hard words to say, but they needed to be said.

Another being would have taken a step, sat, moved, spoken. She was perfectly still. He waited, counting his heartbeats. He

Jude Watson

had taken a decisive step. It would put their friendship to the test.

He was willing to take the risk. At last he had known himself and his feelings. He was not sure of hers. In that moment of revelation he had understood all the tension between them over the past months, all the misunderstandings and irritations. They all had one root. Somewhere inside he had known his feelings for Tahl had deepened, and yet he was reluctant to face that. Back in the hall, the certainty of it had felt like sweet relief.

But now he was not so sure. Tahl appeared flustered, but that could be for any number of reasons.

"If you do not feel the same, I will step back into place and be your friend again," Qui-Gon said. He was a man comfortable with silence, but not this one. He would never want to cause Tahl distress.

"No," Tahl said with sudden warmth. "Do not step back. Let us step forward together. I feel as you do, Qui-Gon."

He took a step forward at the same time as she did. She placed her hand in his.

"I did not know it until this moment," she said. "Or maybe I did. Maybe I've known it for some time."

He felt her fingers, warm and strong in his. "I pledge myself to you, Tahl."

"I pledge myself to you, Qui-Gon."

They stood, not moving for a moment. But both of them were now conscious of what waited for them outside the door.

"I must go to the meeting," Tahl said. "Yes," Qui-Gon agreed.

"We are Jedi. Our life together will be full of separations."

"Yet we will have one life, together."

"Yes."

"When you return, we shall escort the twins back to Coruscant," Qui-Gon said.

"Unless the government asks for our help," Tahl amended.

"Yes, unless we are asked officially to stay," Qui-Gon agreed.

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"Whatever decision we make, we will be together," Tahl said.
"Yes," Qui-Gon agreed. "At last this is clear."

Chapter Eighteen

Obi-Wan waited outside the door. He couldn't imagine why Qui-Gon had asked for privacy. What could he have to say to Tahl that his Padawan could not hear? Obi-Wan tried not to resent this. Whatever decision his Master made was undoubtedly the right one. Yet he still felt left out, sitting on the stairs outside the closed door like a child.

At last the door opened. Qui-Gon saw him on the stairs and walked toward him, Tahl at his side.

"Tahl will go to the peace meeting," he told Obi-Wan. "We will wait for her here with the twins. When she returns, if the official government of New Apsolon does not request our help, we will escort the twins off-planet as they wish. We will monitor the situation from the Temple, and return if we are asked."

Obi-Wan nodded. He had known this before they had gone into the room. So why did Qui-Gon seem different? The hunted look on his face was gone. Something profound had changed inside that room.

"We are not leaving a stable planet, but at least we can bring the twins to safety," Qui-Gon said. "That was the initial goal of the mission."

"And we will leave with negotiations in place, I hope," Tahl said.

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Balog appeared. "It is time."

Tahl nodded. "I am ready."

She did not say good-bye to Qui-Gon or Obi-Wan, but walked out with Balog. Qui-Gon watched until the door closed behind them.

With the dawn came activity. Roan's body was removed, accompanied by Manex. Arrangements were made for the Supreme Governor to lie in state before his funeral. The twins went to their quarters to rest before packing for the journey to Coruscant.

Qui-Gon arranged for a morning meal. Obi-Wan was grateful. It had been a long night, and his appetite had returned. He ate everything on his tray and watched Qui-Gon sip his tea and have a few bites of bread.

"Are you worried about the meeting?" Obi-Wan asked.

Qui-Gon stared into his teacup. "I wasn't. But there is something... something still troubling me."

They heard a loud voice outside the door and the sound of a scuffle.

"Take your hands off me, you slimy space lizard! Let me see them! Bring them my name! They will see me!"

Qui-Gon strode to the door and opened it. Irini stood, her arm in the grip of a security guard.

"Tell them to let me go!" she said furiously. "I have come for talk, not conflict."

Qui-Gon nodded at the guard. Irini gave him a baleful look as she brushed past him and walked into the room.

"What right do they have to abuse me?" she complained to the Jedi, straightening her tunic. "I am not a criminal. I am a citizen. And what do you need security for? You're Jedi. A neutral party, isn't that right?"

"Maybe we need security because people send probe droids after us and shoot at us in alleyways," Qui-Gon pointed out.

Irini looked blank. "Are you saying I did this?"

Jude Watson

"We found your insignia on the ammunition," Obi-Wan said. He pointed to her necklace, which was swinging outside her tunic.

"This is the insignia of the Workers," Irini said. "It is not mine alone. I didn't shoot at you, Jedi. I admit, I wasn't happy to learn you were on our planet, but violence is not my path. Neither is it the path of the Workers. I do not think it was any of us who tried to harm you. Perhaps it was someone who wanted you to think so."

"Perhaps," Obi-Wan said. He did not know what to believe.

Qui-Gon gestured at her to sit down. "What brings you here, Irini?"

"I am concerned about the unrest on New Apsolon," Irini said. "We wanted change, but not like this. Not with another assassination and the kidnapping of children. I have some information that might be useful to you – if you really are here to guard the peace. Since we do not know who in the government to trust, we took a vote and decided to trust the Jedi." She frowned at them. "I hope you will prove worthy of our confidence."

"If you do not trust us, you will not be convinced by our assurance," Qui-Gon said. "It is up to you to make that choice."

She gave both of them a hard stare. "That choice has already been made by committee. I am the emissary. I must tell you that the Workers have been blamed by the Civilized for both the murder of Roan and the kidnapping of the twins. I am here to tell you that the Workers were not involved in either."

"You can speak for the Workers as a whole?" Qui-Gon asked.

"Yes," she said. "We are highly organized and speak as one bloc. If there were violent factions, we would know it."

"And would you admit it?" Obi-Wan asked.

Irini sighed. "It has come to this. We know we are on the brink of civil war again. No one wants this. So, yes, we would be frank if we thought there were outlaw Workers who were willing

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to kidnap young girls and murder a governor to get what they wanted. But we do not believe this."

"You said you had information," Qui-Gon said.

She leaned forward. "We know that someone in Roan's inner circle was behind both the kidnapping and his death. Someone important. Someone who wants more power."

"Who?" Obi-Wan asked.

"This we do not know."

"How can you be so certain that this information is correct?" Qui-Gon asked.

Irini hesitated. "Because we have a spy in this house. Someone to watch the twins, to protect them."

"They did not do such a good job," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"No," Irini admitted. "That is because the security procedures were violated at the highest level. As you know, this place uses top security. It could only be infiltrated by someone who knew it intimately. Someone who had the key to the code. Someone who knew exactly how to overpower the guards, and exactly how long it would take the second force to arrive."

"Who is your spy?" Qui-Gon asked.

"One of the security guards. That is why we know so much about Roan's security."

"If the Workers know the security, they could have kidnapped the twins," Obi-Wan pointed out.

"No. We know the procedures, but not the code," Irini explained. "Only a handful of people have that information."

"Who?"

She shook her head, frustrated. "We don't know that for sure. We just know they are close to Roan."

Obi-Wan turned to Qui-Con. "That first day, when we saw the twins..."

Qui-Gon suddenly looked pale. *"Our security is in the hands of the top security officer, Balog himself..."*

Jude Watson

"Could it be Balog?" Obi-Wan asked. "If so, sending him to the meeting was not wise. He has a hidden agenda. He is not for Roan, but against him."

"So the chance for peace may be compromised," Qui-Gon said grimly. He turned to Irini. "You must be aware that Balog may be playing false in peace negotiations. We do not know for sure, but we need to consider this. This meeting is too important to risk."

"By the way, shouldn't you be there?" Obi-Wan asked. "It starts at dawn."

Irini looked puzzled. "What meeting?" she asked.

Chapter Nineteen

The look on Irini's face made him act faster than he had ever moved in his life. Qui-Gon was out in the hall before he was even conscious of rising from his chair. But even as fast as he moved, he knew Obi-Wan was behind him.

He had sent Tahl off with Balog. There was no meeting. Balog had separated her from them for a reason. He did not know the reason, but he feared the worst.

He had failed her. With all his reliance on his vision, he had not trusted it far enough. He had let her go.

Balog had told them that the meeting was to be held in a secret meeting room in the nearby Institute for Government Service building. Qui-Gon and Obi-Wan raced there through the empty streets. The rising suns stained the pavement with red. The world was beginning to stir.

"We could be wrong," Obi-Wan said as they ran. "There are others who could have been behind the kidnapping. Irini thinks that several know the security code."

"Yes, we could be wrong," Qui-Gon agreed. But he did not think so.

He knew the secret meeting room was off Roan's office. They pounded down the hall. Roan's assistant was just opening up the office. He looked shocked as the Jedi burst in.

Jude Watson

"What are you doing here?"

"The secret meeting room," Qui-Gon said. "Take us there."

"I... I don't know," the assistant stammered. Qui-Gon took three steps toward him. He said only one word. "Now."

The assistant nodded nervously. He accessed a hidden door in the paneling, then led them down a short corridor. Another durasteel door was at the end of it.

Qui-Gon's footsteps slowed at the sight of what lay outside the door. A voice cried out inside his chest.

No!

Tahl's lightsaber lay in a small bin. With it were several blasters.

She would never have been separated from her lightsaber if she hadn't been convinced that without it the meeting would not take place.

"Access the door," Qui-Gon ordered the assistant.

The door slid open. There was an empty table. Empty chairs. There was no sign of Balog or Tahl.

In an agony of frustration, Qui-Gon raised the hilt of his lightsaber and brought it down on the table. The table cracked and a long jagged split appeared.

Obi-Wan looked at him, astonished. He had never seen Qui-Gon lose control before.

Qui-Gon closed his eyes and weaved with the intensity of emotion inside him. He saw her dull eyes, felt her weak touch, heard her voice in his ear.

"It is too late for me, dear friend."

His Padawan spoke at his elbow. "We will find them, Qui-Gon."

He swallowed against his anguish and guilt, pushing them down, down deep where they would not interfere with his reason, his judgment, his purpose.

He opened his eyes and met the resolute gaze of his Padawan. He wanted to tell Obi-Wan that if they did not find her in time, if

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his vision came true, he knew one thing: He would be forever changed. Forever half of what he was. What he could have been.

"We must," he said.

End of Volume Three
Concluded In Volume Four

About the Author

JUDE WATSON is the *New York Times* best-selling author of the Jedi Quest and Jedi Apprentice series, as well as the Star Wars Journals *Darth Maul*, *Queen Amidala*, and *Princess Leia: Captive to Evil*. She currently lives in the Pacific Northwest.

About the Type

Garamond is a group of many serif typefaces, named for sixteenth-century Parisian engraver Claude Garamond, generally spelled as Garamont in his lifetime. Garamond-style typefaces are popular and particularly often used for book printing and body text.

Garamond's types followed the model of an influential typeface cut for Venetian printer Aldus Manutius by his punchcutter Francesco Griffo in 1495, and are in what is now called the old-style of serif letter design, letters with a relatively organic structure resembling handwriting with a pen, but with a slightly more structured, upright design.